

Blades of Honor

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Contents

The Last Duel.....	1
The Duelist's Pact.....	3
The Lady and the Blade.....	13
The Code of Blood.....	24
The King's Challenge.....	35
Bonds of Steel.....	45
The Shadow Duel.....	57
The Crimson Tide.....	68
Legacy of Honor.....	79

The Last Duel

The moon hung heavy in the midnight sky, its silvery glow casting long shadows across the manicured hedges and marble statues of the garden. A faint breeze rustled the leaves, carrying the scent of jasmine mingled with the metallic tang of blood. Two figures faced each other on the gravel path, swords drawn, their breath visible in the cool night air.

The taller of the two—a man with sharp, aquiline features and a crimson sash tied across his waist—adjusted his grip on the hilt of his rapier. His opponent, shorter and stockier but no less imposing, shifted his weight, the tip of his blade barely trembling as it reflected the moonlight. Neither spoke; the silence between them was palpable, pregnant with tension and unspoken words. Around them, the world seemed to hold its breath.

“Will you not explain yourself?” the taller man finally broke the silence, his voice cold and sharp as the blade in his hand. “You owe me that much, at least.”

The stockier man laughed—a low, bitter sound that carried no mirth. “Explain? What explanation would satisfy you, Lucien? That I betrayed you? That I lied to your face while plotting your downfall? Words are meaningless now. All that remains is the sword.”

Lucien narrowed his eyes. “You speak of betrayal as though it were a trivial matter, François. Was it not you who spoke of loyalty, of honor? And yet here we stand, as enemies.”

François’s face darkened. “Honor is a fragile thing, my friend. It shatters under the weight of survival. I did what I had to.”

Lucien took a measured step forward, his blade rising in a graceful arc. “And I will do what I must,” he said, his voice soft but resolute. “Defend yourself.”

With that, the duel began.

The first clash of steel rang out like a peal of thunder, shattering the stillness of the garden. Lucien moved with the fluidity of a dancer, his strikes precise and calculated. François countered with brute force, his blade driving forward in short, vicious thrusts. Sparks flew as their swords met again and again, each man pushing the other to his limits.

The duel was not just a contest of skill but a battle of wills. Lucien’s movements were controlled, almost elegant, as though he fought to prove something beyond the immediate fight. François, on the other hand, fought like a cornered animal—desperate and ferocious, his strikes aimed not just to wound but to kill.

“You fight well, for a liar,” Lucien taunted, sidestepping a particularly vicious lunge. His riposte sliced through François’s sleeve, drawing a thin line of blood.

“And you talk too much, for a corpse,” François snarled, pressing the attack.

They circled each other, the moonlight catching every bead of sweat on their brows, every subtle shift in their postures. Around them, the garden seemed to shrink, the walls of hedges looming closer as if the duel itself had warped the very space.

Then, with a deft feint, Lucien drove François back against a marble fountain. The older man stumbled, his footing faltering for just a moment—but it was enough. Lucien's blade darted forward, grazing François's side. Blood bloomed against the white of his shirt, but he gritted his teeth and swung wildly, forcing Lucien to retreat.

"You should have killed me when you had the chance," François growled, his voice thick with pain.

Lucien hesitated for a fraction of a second, and in that moment, François surged forward, their swords locking in a brutal bind. Face to face, their breaths mingled as they strained against each other.

"Why, François?" Lucien whispered, his voice almost pleading. "Why betray me?"

For the first time, something like regret flickered in François's eyes. But it was gone in an instant, replaced by grim determination. With a sudden burst of strength, he broke the bind and drove his blade forward. Lucien twisted just in time, the blade slicing past his ribs but missing anything vital. He retaliated with a swift riposte, his sword plunging into François's chest.

François staggered, his sword falling from his hand to clatter against the gravel. He dropped to his knees, clutching the wound as blood seeped through his fingers.

Lucien stood over him, his chest heaving, his sword still in hand. "Speak," he commanded. "If you have any honor left, tell me the truth."

François laughed again, a wet, gurgling sound as blood bubbled at his lips. "You think... this ends with me?" he rasped. "You're a fool, Lucien. This betrayal... it's only the beginning."

Lucien crouched down, his face inches from François's. "What do you mean? Who else is involved?"

François smiled faintly, his teeth stained red. "The court... the crown... shadows move where you cannot see. Beware... the wolf in silk."

With those final, cryptic words, François collapsed, his body going limp. Lucien knelt there for a moment, staring at his fallen opponent, the words echoing in his mind.

The garden was silent once more, save for the distant chirping of crickets. Lucien rose slowly, wiping his blade on the hem of his cloak before sheathing it. He glanced up at the moon, its pale light now casting a cold, unforgiving glow over the scene.

"Beware the wolf in silk," he murmured to himself. "The game begins."

He turned and walked away, leaving François's body behind as the shadows of the garden seemed to close in around it.

The Duelist's Pact

The dusty light of dawn crept into the worn, wooden beams of the small fencing studio. Nestled on the outskirts of a sleepy village, far from the opulent courts and bustling streets Gabriel d'Artois once called home, the studio was an unassuming space—a relic of better days. The cracked mirror at one end reflected Gabriel's image as he moved with deliberate precision, a rapier in his hand tracing slow arcs through the air. His once-proud figure was leaner now, his hair streaked with gray, but his movements remained sharp, a faint echo of the man he had been.

Gabriel completed his routine with a final, fluid lunge, the blade stopping a hairsbreadth from an imaginary opponent. He held the position, his breathing steady, then straightened with a sigh. The rapier felt heavier than it used to, or perhaps the weight came from within.

The solitude of this place suited him. Here, he was free from the whispers of scandal, the sharp tongues of courtiers, and the guilt that gnawed at his conscience. His hands tightened on the hilt of his blade. He had not touched a sword in anger in years, not since the day his world had crumbled.

"Master d'Artois?" a hesitant voice called from the doorway.

Gabriel froze. He had not expected visitors. Setting the rapier aside, he turned slowly. A young man, no older than twenty, stood silhouetted against the morning light. His clothing, though simple, bore the unmistakable quality of noble craftsmanship—a fine velvet doublet, polished boots, and a jeweled pin glinting at his collar. His face, boyishly handsome but pale with tension, looked familiar. Gabriel recognized him at once: Philippe de Vigny, the youngest son of a minor noble family from the region.

"What brings you here, my lord?" Gabriel asked, his voice guarded but polite. He had long learned to avoid entanglements with nobility.

The boy stepped inside, glancing nervously around the studio before fixing his gaze on Gabriel. "I... I was told you could help me," he said, his voice trembling slightly. "They say you are the finest swordsman in all of France."

Gabriel allowed himself a faint, bitter smile. "They say many things, young master. Few of them true."

Philippe took another step forward, his expression earnest. "I've heard the stories. I know what happened at court—why you left—but I don't care about that. I need your help."

Gabriel frowned, his posture stiffening. "If you know what happened, then you know I am no longer the man you're looking for. I don't teach anymore."

"Please." Philippe's voice cracked, and he stepped closer, his desperation plain. "They mean to ruin me. My father's honor—my family's name—it's all at stake. If I lose this duel, they'll call us cowards. Traitors, even."

Gabriel studied the boy, his eyes narrowing. “A duel? And what cause do you have to cross blades with someone so intent on your downfall?”

Philippe hesitated, his hands clenching at his sides. “It’s... complicated,” he admitted, his gaze dropping to the floor. “But the Duke of Laroque is behind it. He’s been plotting against my father, and now he’s provoked me—challenged me through his nephew. If I refuse, I’ll lose everything.”

The mention of the Duke of Laroque sent a shiver through Gabriel, though he kept his face impassive. He knew the man well—a cunning manipulator with a ruthless streak. Laroque had been a fixture of court intrigue for decades, and his entanglements often left ruin in their wake.

Gabriel turned away, picking up a rag to clean his rapier. “Then you have my advice: apologize, withdraw, and live to fight another day. There is no shame in avoiding a trap.”

Philippe bristled. “You don’t understand! This isn’t just about me. It’s my family’s name. My father can’t fight his battles anymore, and my brothers are gone. If I don’t defend our honor, we’ll lose everything.”

Gabriel’s movements slowed. The boy’s words struck a chord he couldn’t ignore, stirring memories he had tried to bury. Honor. The word felt hollow to him now, but once, it had been everything. He turned back to Philippe, his expression hard.

“You don’t know what you’re asking of me,” Gabriel said, his voice quiet but firm. “To step into this world again, to train someone to face death—it’s not a choice I make lightly.”

Philippe’s jaw tightened, his youthful determination cutting through his fear. “I’ll pay whatever you ask. Name your price.”

Gabriel shook his head. “It’s not about money.”

“Then what is it about?” Philippe demanded. “I’m willing to do whatever it takes. Just tell me how to convince you.”

The silence between them stretched, heavy with unspoken tension. Gabriel’s eyes searched Philippe’s face, looking for something—resolve, perhaps, or foolishness. What he saw reminded him of another young man, years ago, who had stood with a blade in his hand and fire in his heart.

“Very well,” Gabriel said at last, his voice like the scrape of steel. “I will teach you. But understand this: swordplay is not just a skill. It’s a choice—a choice to carry death with you every time you draw your blade. Once you cross that line, there’s no going back.”

Philippe nodded, his face pale but resolute. “I understand.”

Gabriel doubted that, but he gestured for the boy to follow him deeper into the studio. As he picked up his blade once more, he couldn’t help but wonder if this choice would lead to redemption—or ruin.

Gabriel held the rapier in his hand, the blade glinting faintly under the muted light streaming through the studio's high windows. Philippe stood opposite him, stiff and uneasy, gripping his own blade as though it might leap from his grasp. The boy's posture betrayed his inexperience—his shoulders were too high, his stance too rigid. Gabriel let out a quiet sigh, already seeing the gaps that an experienced duelist would exploit.

"Relax your shoulders," Gabriel said, his tone measured but firm. "You're not holding a battering ram. A sword is meant to move as naturally as your arm."

Philippe adjusted awkwardly, his cheeks flushing with embarrassment. Gabriel circled him, studying his stance. "Your feet are wrong. Widen your base, just enough to keep your balance. Yes, like that. Now shift your weight forward—no, not so much! You're preparing for a charge, not planting a tree."

Philippe stumbled slightly as he tried to correct his position, muttering an apology. Gabriel suppressed the urge to roll his eyes. The boy's determination was admirable, but he had the finesse of a newborn colt. If this were a tournament, he wouldn't last ten seconds.

Gabriel stepped back, gesturing for Philippe to lower his weapon. "You're tense because you're afraid of making a mistake," he said. "But fear is your enemy, not your teacher. Until you can control it, you'll be little more than a lamb waiting for the butcher."

Philippe looked down, his grip tightening on the rapier. "I don't have time to master fear," he muttered. "The duel is in three weeks."

Gabriel raised an eyebrow. "Then you have even less time to waste on bad habits."

He picked up a blunt practice blade from the rack and walked to the center of the room. "We'll start with the basics. Footwork first. A poor stance will get you killed faster than a dull blade. Position yourself in front of me."

Philippe moved to comply, his movements stiff but obedient. Gabriel began demonstrating the fundamental steps—advance, retreat, lunge—each motion deliberate and precise. Philippe mirrored him, stumbling at first but gradually finding a rhythm.

As the boy practiced, Gabriel's thoughts wandered to another time, another student. The image came unbidden: a young man with a fiery temper and a sharp tongue, who had once stood in this very room. André.

The name was a bitter echo in Gabriel's mind. André had been Gabriel's brightest pupil—a natural swordsman with ambition to match. But his hunger for glory had led him down a dark path. Gabriel could still see the look in André's eyes during their last encounter, when the student had turned his blade on the master. Betrayal, hot and raw, burned anew in Gabriel's chest.

"Are you listening, Master d'Artois?" Philippe's voice broke through his reverie. Gabriel blinked, realizing he had stopped mid-demonstration.

"Forgive me," Gabriel said, shaking off the memory. He raised his practice blade. "Now, defend yourself."

Philippe hesitated, his grip faltering. “But I don’t know how—”

“Good. Then you’ll have no bad habits to unlearn.” Gabriel lunged, his blade moving in a slow, deliberate arc. Philippe flinched and raised his rapier instinctively, clumsily deflecting the strike. Gabriel stopped, his expression neutral.

“Better than I expected,” he said. “But only because I’m going easy on you. Again.”

They repeated the exercise, Gabriel’s strikes growing faster with each pass. Philippe improved in small increments, his reactions less hesitant, his posture more stable. By the end of the hour, the boy was drenched in sweat, his chest heaving.

Gabriel lowered his blade. “That’s enough for today. Rest. I’ll prepare the lesson for tomorrow.”

Philippe collapsed onto a nearby bench, wiping his brow with his sleeve. “Do you think I’ll be ready in time?” he asked, his voice tinged with doubt.

Gabriel didn’t answer immediately. He looked at the boy, seeing both his potential and his flaws. There was fire in Philippe, but fire alone wouldn’t win a duel. It was discipline that turned potential into strength, and Gabriel had seen too many young men squander their lives chasing honor without understanding its cost.

“I’ll make you as ready as I can,” Gabriel said finally. “But understand this: dueling isn’t about strength, speed, or even skill. It’s about knowing why you fight. If your reason isn’t clear, you’ve already lost.”

Philippe frowned. “I’m fighting for my family. Isn’t that reason enough?”

“Perhaps,” Gabriel said, though his tone suggested otherwise. He set the practice blade back on the rack, his fingers brushing the worn wood. “But remember: honor doesn’t fill your lungs when you’re bleeding out on the ground. It doesn’t heal broken bones or silence the whispers that come after.”

Philippe’s expression darkened, but he said nothing. Gabriel could see the stubborn determination in his eyes, the same look André had worn on the day of their fateful duel. He knew better than to press the boy further—for now.

Gabriel turned toward the door, his voice quiet as he spoke over his shoulder. “Tomorrow, we’ll begin with parries. Rest well. You’ll need it.”

Philippe watched him go, the weight of the lesson settling heavily on his shoulders. As the door closed behind Gabriel, the boy stared down at the rapier in his lap, his grip tightening. Somewhere deep within, the first seeds of doubt began to take root.

The midday sun filtered through the studio’s high windows, casting long beams of light across the polished wooden floor. Philippe stood with his blade raised, his movements still awkward but more confident than they had been just hours earlier. Gabriel observed from the side, his arms crossed, his critical eye missing nothing.

“Better,” Gabriel said finally, stepping forward to correct Philippe’s stance. “Your movements are starting to flow. But you’re hesitating in the follow-through. A skilled opponent will see that hesitation and punish it.”

Philippe sighed, lowering his rapier. “You make it sound so easy.”

Gabriel chuckled dryly. “It isn’t. But neither is surviving a duel. Again.”

Philippe gritted his teeth and resumed his stance. The boy’s determination impressed Gabriel, but there was something else gnawing at the edges of his mind—a tension that went beyond the usual nerves of a young man preparing for his first duel. Gabriel could see it in Philippe’s eyes, the way they darted nervously when he thought Gabriel wasn’t looking.

“Stop,” Gabriel said abruptly. Philippe froze mid-step, his brow furrowing.

“What is it?” Philippe asked.

Gabriel stepped closer, lowering the boy’s blade with a light touch. “Your movements are improving, but your mind is elsewhere. You can’t fight like this. Whatever’s distracting you, you need to face it—here, not on the dueling ground.”

Philippe hesitated, his shoulders tensing. “It’s nothing.”

“Lying to your opponent in a duel might save your life,” Gabriel said, his tone sharpening, “but lying to your teacher will get you killed.”

The words hung in the air, and Philippe’s face reddened. He lowered his blade and turned away, running a hand through his disheveled hair. For a moment, Gabriel thought he might storm out, but then Philippe exhaled deeply and faced him.

“It’s the Duke,” Philippe admitted, his voice low. “He’s... using me.”

Gabriel tilted his head, his eyes narrowing. “The Duke of Laroque?”

Philippe nodded. “He’s been pressuring my father for months, trying to force him into a political alliance. My father refused—he has no desire to be a pawn in the Duke’s games. But Laroque doesn’t take refusal lightly.”

Gabriel’s lips pressed into a thin line. He had seen the Duke’s handiwork before—subtle, insidious, and always effective. “And what does this have to do with you?”

“The Duke’s nephew, Henri,” Philippe continued, his voice trembling with frustration, “he insulted me publicly at a banquet. Called my family cowards and traitors. I had no choice but to challenge him. My father begged me to back down, but if I did... our name would be ruined.”

Gabriel’s eyes darkened. “You think this was orchestrated.”

“I know it was,” Philippe said, his fists clenching at his sides. “Henri doesn’t care about the duel. He’s just the Duke’s pawn, like everyone else. If I die, the Duke wins. If I refuse, he wins. I’m trapped.”

The studio fell silent except for the faint rustle of the trees outside. Gabriel stared at the boy, his expression unreadable. He had no love for Laroque; the man’s web of power and manipulation had ensnared many, and Gabriel had witnessed the consequences firsthand. But this was more than a game of politics. It was a death trap.

“You’re right,” Gabriel said finally. “The Duke is playing you. And if you go into this duel blind, you’ll give him exactly what he wants.”

Philippe’s face fell. “Then... what am I supposed to do? Withdraw and admit defeat?”

Gabriel shook his head. “No. You fight. But you fight on your terms, not his.”

Philippe frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“You will,” Gabriel said. “But first, I need to know the truth. What’s the Duke’s endgame? What does he gain from this?”

Philippe hesitated, then looked away. “I don’t know. My father suspects it has to do with his claim to the southern territories—lands the Duke has coveted for years. If I fall in the duel, it weakens our family’s position. The Duke could force my father’s hand.”

Gabriel’s jaw tightened. The pieces were falling into place, but the picture they formed was as grim as he had feared. This wasn’t just about pride or honor; it was a calculated move in a far-reaching game of power.

“And you’ve come to me because you think I can help you beat him,” Gabriel said.

Philippe met his gaze, his eyes filled with desperation. “I don’t just think it—I know it. You’re the only one who can teach me to survive this.”

Gabriel studied the boy for a long moment, weighing his options. He could walk away, leave Philippe to face his fate alone. It wasn’t his fight, after all. But as much as he wanted to keep his distance, he couldn’t ignore the echoes of his past. He had seen too many young men fall victim to the machinations of men like Laroque.

“I’ll continue your training,” Gabriel said at last. “But understand this: I won’t just teach you how to wield a blade. I’ll teach you how to think like a duelist, how to anticipate your opponent’s moves. That’s the only way you’ll have a chance.”

Philippe’s expression brightened, but Gabriel’s stern tone quickly tempered his enthusiasm. “This isn’t a guarantee,” Gabriel warned. “A blade can only do so much against the Duke’s power. You’ll need more than skill to survive.”

Philippe nodded, his determination returning. “I’ll do whatever it takes.”

Gabriel turned away, retrieving a practice blade from the rack. “Then let’s begin. We don’t have time to waste.”

As Philippe assumed his stance, Gabriel’s mind churned with unanswered questions. The Duke’s motives were clear enough, but the boy’s role in his schemes was still a mystery. One thing was certain: this wasn’t a simple duel. It was a thread in a much larger tapestry of deceit, and Gabriel had just taken hold of it.

The moon hung low over the sprawling gardens of the Duke of Laroque’s estate, its pale light illuminating the rows of meticulously trimmed hedges and fountains. The estate was eerily quiet, save for the faint murmur of voices coming from a secluded pavilion tucked away at the far end of the grounds. Two figures stood beneath its arched roof, their faces shadowed by the ornate columns that surrounded them.

Henri de Laroque, the Duke’s nephew, leaned casually against a marble pillar, a sly grin playing on his lips. Opposite him stood a stout man with an air of barely concealed ambition—Armand de Chalons, a minor noble with aspirations far beyond his station. The two men spoke in hushed tones, their words carried away by the light breeze that stirred the nearby rose bushes.

“You’re certain this will work?” Armand asked, his voice tinged with uncertainty. “The boy’s no duelist. What if he refuses?”

Henri chuckled softly, the sound as sharp and cold as the steel of a blade. “He won’t refuse. Philippe de Vigny is a child playing at nobility. He’s too proud, too desperate to prove himself. All we need is for him to step onto the dueling ground, and the rest will take care of itself.”

Armand frowned, glancing around as if to ensure they weren’t being overheard. “And if it doesn’t? The Duke assured me this would be clean.”

Henri pushed off the pillar and stepped closer, his grin widening. “It will be. Philippe won’t leave that field alive, and with him gone, his family’s influence will crumble. The Duke will secure the southern territories, and you, dear Armand, will find yourself in a very advantageous position.”

Armand’s eyes flickered with greed, but his expression remained cautious. “And the Duke? What does he gain from all this?”

Henri’s grin faltered, replaced by a glint of irritation. “The Duke gains what he always gains: power. That’s all you need to know.”

The two men fell silent for a moment, the tension between them palpable. Then Henri clapped a hand on Armand’s shoulder, his tone softening into something almost affable. “Relax, my friend. Everything is proceeding as planned. Philippe is as good as dead, and once he’s out of the way, the Duke’s influence will extend over the entire region.”

Armand nodded, his hesitation giving way to a reluctant smile. “Very well. I trust your confidence, Henri. Let us hope it’s not misplaced.”

As the two men turned to leave the pavilion, neither noticed the shadow that melted silently into the darkness of the hedge maze. The figure moved swiftly, its footsteps light and deliberate, until it reached the edge of the estate and disappeared into the night.

Gabriel d'Artois leaned back in his chair, his gaze fixed on the flickering candle in front of him. Philippe's latest attempts at fencing had been earnest but uninspired, and Gabriel's patience was wearing thin. The boy had potential, but potential wouldn't be enough to survive the duel that awaited him.

His thoughts were interrupted by a faint knock at the door. Gabriel's head snapped up, his hand instinctively moving to the rapier propped against the wall. "Who is it?" he called.

"It's me," Philippe's voice came from the other side. "May I come in?"

Gabriel relaxed and gestured for the boy to enter. Philippe stepped inside, his face pale and his movements anxious. He looked as though he hadn't slept in days.

"What is it?" Gabriel asked, motioning for him to sit. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

Philippe hesitated, wringing his hands. "I... I've heard something. Something troubling."

Gabriel leaned forward, his interest piqued. "Go on."

"The Duke," Philippe began, his voice trembling slightly. "I overheard one of his men speaking with my father's steward. They mentioned a meeting—something about a plan to... to ensure the duel goes in Henri's favor."

Gabriel's eyes narrowed. "What kind of plan?"

"I don't know," Philippe admitted, his frustration evident. "But it's clear the Duke is pulling strings. This isn't just about the insult. He wants me dead, Master d'Artois. I'm certain of it."

Gabriel frowned, his mind racing. The Duke's motives were already suspect, but if what Philippe said was true, the duel was no mere test of skill or honor. It was a trap, designed to destroy the boy and cripple his family.

"Did they say anything else?" Gabriel asked.

Philippe shook his head. "No, but... I thought you should know."

Gabriel leaned back, his hand brushing the hilt of his rapier as if seeking reassurance. "You were right to tell me. If the Duke is manipulating this, we need to be prepared."

Philippe looked at him, his expression a mix of hope and desperation. "Do you think we can stop him?"

Gabriel didn't answer immediately. His thoughts returned to the Duke's reputation—the whispers of backroom deals, of ruined families and silent graves. If they were to face him, they would need more than skill or strategy. They would need allies, information, and perhaps even a little luck.

“We’ll do more than stop him,” Gabriel said at last, his voice steady. “We’ll turn his game against him. But first, we need to know exactly what he’s planning. Leave that to me.”

Philippe nodded, relief washing over his face. “Thank you, Master d’Artois.”

Gabriel watched the boy leave, the door closing softly behind him. Alone again, he allowed himself a moment to reflect. The Duke’s web of influence was vast, and Gabriel had no doubt that stepping into it would come at a cost. But he also knew that walking away would be a greater betrayal—to Philippe, to himself, and to the principles he had once held dear.

He stood, his hand tightening on the hilt of his blade. If the Duke thought he could play games with the life of a young man under Gabriel’s protection, he would soon learn the price of such arrogance.

The public square buzzed with anticipation, the crowd pressing closer to the makeshift dueling ground marked by a circle of stones. Nobles in their silks and furs jostled for the best vantage points, while commoners craned their necks from the back, eager for a glimpse of the spectacle. At the center stood Philippe de Vigny, his face pale but resolute, his rapier trembling slightly in his grip. Across from him, Henri de Laroque lounged with an air of disdain, his sword resting lazily at his side.

Gabriel stood at the edge of the crowd, his heart pounding as he watched Philippe adjust his stance. The boy was not ready. No amount of last-minute training could make up for the experience and cunning that Henri possessed. Gabriel knew this duel was a farce—a performance orchestrated by the Duke to crush the de Vigny family’s honor and solidify his own power.

“Philippel!” Gabriel called, stepping forward, his voice cutting through the murmurs of the crowd. “This isn’t the way. Call it off. There’s no shame in walking away from a rigged game.”

Philippe turned to him, his expression strained. “I can’t,” he said, his voice loud enough for the crowd to hear. “If I back down now, my family will be disgraced.”

“You can’t defend your family if you’re dead,” Gabriel snapped, taking another step forward. “This isn’t about honor—it’s a trap, and you’re walking right into it.”

Henri smiled, his voice dripping with mockery. “Master d’Artois, you wound me. Are you suggesting I would dishonor myself by setting a trap? Surely a great swordsman like you would see that I prefer a fair fight.”

The crowd chuckled nervously at Henri’s theatrical display, and Gabriel’s fists clenched. He could see the trap tightening, the Duke’s invisible hand guiding every move.

“Let’s get on with it,” Henri said, drawing his rapier and saluting Philippe with a flourish. “Unless, of course, you’d rather yield.”

Philippe raised his blade, his face hardening with determination. “I won’t yield,” he said, his voice firm. “Let’s finish this.”

Gabriel opened his mouth to shout again, but it was too late. The duel had begun.

Henri moved first, his blade flashing in a quick feint that Philippe barely parried. The crowd erupted in cheers and gasps as the two men circled each other, their movements starkly different. Henri was fluid and relaxed, his strikes calculated and precise. Philippe, by contrast, was tense and reactive, his inexperience showing in every rushed block and clumsy riposte.

Gabriel watched with a growing sense of dread. Philippe was fighting on pure instinct, his form collapsing under the pressure. Henri, meanwhile, was toying with him, allowing the fight to drag on, his strikes growing increasingly aggressive.

“Stay back, Philippe,” Gabriel muttered under his breath, willing the boy to see the danger. “Don’t overcommit.”

But Philippe didn’t hear him. Henri lunged again, and this time, Philippe counterattacked, driving forward with a reckless thrust. The crowd roared as his blade nicked Henri’s shoulder, drawing the first blood of the duel. Philippe hesitated for a split second, his confidence bolstered by the hit.

It was all Henri needed.

With a sharp twist of his wrist, Henri deflected Philippe’s next strike and stepped inside his guard. The movement was so quick, so fluid, that the crowd barely had time to react. Henri’s blade darted upward, slicing across Philippe’s chest. Philippe staggered backward, his rapier slipping from his hand as blood blossomed across his tunic.

The square fell silent.

Philippe dropped to his knees, clutching at his wound, his breaths shallow and ragged. Gabriel surged forward, shoving his way through the stunned crowd. He knelt beside Philippe, pressing his hands against the boy’s chest in a futile attempt to stem the bleeding.

“Stay with me,” Gabriel said, his voice hoarse. “You’re going to be fine. Just hold on.”

Philippe’s eyes flickered open, his gaze unfocused. “I... I’m sorry,” he whispered, his voice barely audible. “I... couldn’t...”

His words trailed off, and his head lolled to the side. Gabriel froze, his hands trembling as the life drained from the boy’s body.

A ripple of shock and murmurs spread through the crowd. Gabriel looked up, his face a mask of fury and grief. Henri stood a few steps away, his sword still drawn, his face twisted into a smirk that he barely tried to conceal. Nearby, Gabriel caught sight of the Duke, seated in a carriage at the edge of the square, his expression unreadable.

And then Gabriel saw it: the faintest gesture from the Duke, a tilt of his head toward Henri. It was a signal—a subtle acknowledgment that confirmed what Gabriel already knew. This duel had never been about honor or justice. It had been an execution.

Rising slowly, Gabriel turned to Henri. “You’ll pay for this,” he said, his voice low and trembling with rage. “You and the Duke both.”

Henri raised an eyebrow, feigning innocence. “I fought honorably,” he said with mock sincerity. “The boy knew the risks. It’s not my fault he wasn’t up to the task.”

Gabriel stepped closer, his hands curling into fists. “You don’t know what you’ve started,” he growled. “This isn’t over.”

Henri’s smirk faltered for a moment, but he quickly recovered. “Take care, Master d’Artois. Threats can be dangerous, especially when made in public.”

Gabriel turned away, his mind already racing. Philippe’s death wasn’t just a tragedy—it was a message. The Duke was sending a warning to anyone who might challenge his power. But Gabriel had no intention of letting the Duke’s schemes go unanswered.

He knelt beside Philippe’s lifeless body one last time, his voice a quiet promise. “I swear, I’ll uncover the truth. And I’ll make them pay.”

The crowd began to disperse, their hushed voices filled with uncertainty and fear. Gabriel rose, his jaw set, his grief hardening into resolve. The Duke thought he had won, but Gabriel knew better.

This was just the beginning.

The Lady and the Blade

The grand hall of the Château de Montclair was ablaze with candlelight, the golden glow bouncing off the polished marble floors and towering tapestries depicting the triumphs of old kings. Amidst the grandeur, Lady Isolde du Montclair stood alone before the assembled nobles, her crimson gown a stark contrast to the pale, impassive faces that regarded her with faint amusement.

Her voice trembled, not with fear, but with barely contained rage. “I demand justice,” she said, her tone ringing clear and sharp through the vaulted chamber. “My brother was murdered in cold blood, and you sit here debating decorum as if his life was worth nothing.”

The Count of Merignac, a stout man with thinning hair and an oily smile, leaned back in his gilded chair at the head of the assembly. “Murdered?” he repeated, his tone dripping with mockery. “Your brother, rest his soul, fell in a duel—an honorable exchange. There was no crime committed.”

Isolde’s fists clenched at her sides, her nails biting into her palms. “Honorable? That duel was a farce! Everyone knows your champion was a hired killer—a common thug with no claim to nobility.”

Gasps rippled through the chamber, and the Count's expression darkened. He stood slowly, his beady eyes fixed on Isolde. "Careful, my lady," he said, his voice low and menacing. "Your accusations tread dangerously close to slander."

"Slander?" Isolde stepped forward, her chin held high. "Then prove me wrong. Let the court examine the circumstances of the duel—the terms, the witnesses, the weaponry. Or are you afraid of what they might uncover?"

The Count's jaw tightened, and for a fleeting moment, Isolde saw the flicker of unease in his eyes. But then he smiled, a thin, cruel twist of his lips. "Your grief blinds you, my lady. Your brother fought bravely and lost. That is all there is to say."

Isolde opened her mouth to retort, but a hand on her arm stopped her. She turned to see her uncle, Lord Ambroise, his face etched with quiet pleading. "Enough, Isolde," he murmured. "You will gain nothing here."

Her heart burned with fury, but she knew he was right. The assembled lords and ladies were not here for justice. They were here to protect their own, to uphold the unwritten rules of power and privilege. To them, she was nothing more than a grieving sister, a young woman who had overstepped her place.

With a final glare at the Count, Isolde turned on her heel and left the chamber, the heavy oak doors slamming shut behind her. She walked swiftly down the stone corridor, her heels clicking against the floor as tears blurred her vision. But these were not tears of sorrow—they were tears of rage, of helplessness, of betrayal.

Outside the château, the cold night air stung her cheeks as she stepped onto the cobblestone courtyard. She paused, her breath clouding in the moonlight, and looked up at the stars scattered across the velvet sky. Her brother, Étienne, had loved the stars. He had often told her they were the only things in the world that could not be touched by corruption.

But Étienne was gone now, his body lying in the family crypt, and the stars offered her no comfort.

"You shouldn't have gone in there," a voice said from the shadows.

Isolde spun around, her hand instinctively reaching for the dagger hidden beneath the folds of her gown. A man emerged from the darkness, his cloak billowing in the breeze. It was Marcus, her late brother's squire, a loyal servant who had stayed with the family even after Étienne's death.

"They would never listen to you," Marcus continued, his voice heavy with regret. "You know that."

"Then what am I supposed to do?" Isolde demanded, her voice breaking. "Let the Count walk free while my brother's name is dragged through the mud? Pretend that justice is blind when it clearly isn't?"

Marcus hesitated, his eyes filled with sympathy. “You know the court will always side with the powerful. The Count has too many allies. If you push too hard, they’ll come after you too.”

Isolde looked away, her jaw tightening. She knew Marcus was right, but the thought of doing nothing was unbearable. Étienne had been more than her brother; he had been her closest confidant, her protector, the one person who had always believed in her strength. She owed him more than this.

“I won’t let his death be forgotten,” she said, her voice quiet but resolute. “If the court won’t give me justice, I’ll find it myself.”

Marcus stepped closer, lowering his voice. “Isolde, please. This path you’re considering—it’s dangerous. Revenge won’t bring Étienne back.”

“Revenge?” She turned to him, her eyes blazing. “This isn’t about revenge. It’s about honor. If I don’t fight for his name, who will?”

Marcus fell silent, his shoulders slumping. He had no answer for her, and she didn’t expect one. Isolde brushed past him, her steps purposeful as she headed toward the stables. She had made her decision.

Later that night, in the solitude of her chambers, Isolde knelt before a chest at the foot of her bed. She opened it carefully, revealing its contents: a set of finely crafted fencing gear that had once belonged to Étienne. She ran her fingers over the hilt of his rapier, the metal cool against her skin. The blade was a thing of beauty—light and deadly, as graceful as it was lethal.

Standing, Isolde raised the sword, testing its weight. It felt unfamiliar in her hand, but not unwelcome. She moved to the center of the room and assumed a stance, her movements hesitant at first but growing more confident with each pass. She had watched Étienne practice countless times; she knew the basics, at least. The rest, she would have to learn.

As she practiced, her mind was already turning. She would need a teacher—someone who could show her not just how to wield a blade, but how to survive a world where power was the only law that mattered.

The court had dismissed her as a grieving sister. The Count had dismissed her as a powerless woman. But they would not dismiss her for long.

Lady Isolde du Montclair was not finished. Not yet.

The clamor of the tavern was deafening, a mix of drunken laughter, clinking tankards, and the occasional shouted insult. Isolde sat in a dark corner, her hood pulled low over her face. Beneath her worn cloak, her chest was bound tightly, her slim figure hidden beneath a loose-fitting tunic and breeches. She adjusted the sword strapped to her hip, still unused to the weight of the weapon. Her hands itched with anticipation.

Across the room, a tall, wiry man leaned against the bar, his arms crossed over his chest. He had a lean face with sharp cheekbones, and his eyes flicked over the crowd with practiced

wariness. This was Renaud, a rogue swordsman and former duelist who had built a reputation as both a brawler and a mercenary. He was exactly the type of teacher Isolde needed—skilled, resourceful, and unbound by the rules of courtly decorum.

She approached him cautiously, her boots scuffing against the floorboards. “You’re Renaud?” she asked, pitching her voice low in an attempt to sound more masculine.

Renaud turned, his sharp eyes narrowing as he looked her up and down. “Who’s asking?” he said, his tone flat and unimpressed.

“Someone in need of a teacher,” she replied, trying to stand taller. “I heard you’re the best swordsman in these parts.”

Renaud snorted. “The best costs more than you can afford, boy. Go home and practice with a stick.”

“I’m not leaving,” Isolde said, her voice firm. “I can pay, and I can learn.”

Renaud studied her for a moment longer, then shrugged. “Suit yourself.” He pushed off the bar and headed for the door, motioning for her to follow. “Let’s see if you’re worth my time.”

The training ground was little more than a clearing behind the tavern, surrounded by overgrown hedges and strewn with discarded barrels and crates. The moon cast long shadows across the space as Renaud drew his blade and gestured for her to do the same.

“Show me what you’ve got,” he said, his tone lazy but his stance poised. “I want to see if you even know how to hold that thing.”

Isolde unsheathed her sword and mirrored the stance she had practiced in secret. Renaud raised an eyebrow, his expression flickering with mild interest.

“Not terrible,” he said. “But not good, either. Come at me.”

She hesitated for a moment before lunging forward, her blade aimed for his midsection. Renaud sidestepped easily, tapping her wrist with the flat of his blade and sending her sword flying from her grip.

“Slow,” he said. “Predictable. Again.”

Isolde retrieved her sword and attacked again, and again, and again. Each time, Renaud countered her moves with casual precision, his blade a blur of motion. Sweat dripped down her face, her breaths coming in short gasps, but she refused to give up.

Finally, she dropped to her knees, her sword falling from her hand. Renaud stood over her, his blade resting on his shoulder. “You’re determined, I’ll give you that,” he said. “But determination won’t keep you alive in a fight.”

Isolde glared up at him, her chest heaving. “Then teach me how to survive.”

Renaud's lips twitched into a faint smirk. "All right," he said, extending a hand to help her up. "But you'd better be ready to work. I don't waste my time on weaklings."

The days that followed were grueling. Renaud's methods were unorthodox, his lessons brutal. He forced her to run drills until her muscles screamed, to spar with him until her arms felt like lead. He corrected her every mistake with sharp words and sharper strikes, pushing her to the brink of exhaustion.

But Isolde didn't falter. Her grief and anger fueled her, driving her to pick herself up after every failure, to push herself harder with every passing day. Renaud, despite his gruff demeanor, began to notice. Her movements grew faster, more fluid. Her strikes became sharper, her defenses stronger. And though she was still far from mastering the sword, she was learning to fight with her mind as well as her body.

One evening, as they sparred beneath the fading light of the sunset, Renaud stepped back and lowered his blade. "You've got talent," he said, his tone begrudging. "Raw, but real. If you keep this up, you might actually stand a chance out there."

Isolde wiped the sweat from her brow, a rare smile flickering across her face. "That's the first compliment you've given me."

"Don't get used to it," Renaud said, though there was a glimmer of pride in his eyes. "You're still green, and green gets you killed. But you've got fire, and fire's a good start."

Isolde nodded, her smile fading as her resolve hardened. "Good. Because I'm not stopping until I can fight the men who killed my brother."

Renaud's expression darkened, but he didn't press her. Instead, he picked up his blade and motioned for her to do the same. "Enough talking. Let's see if you can back that up."

As their swords clashed once more, Isolde felt a spark of hope ignite within her. She wasn't just learning to fight—she was preparing to take back control of her destiny, one strike at a time.

It began as whispers.

A mysterious figure, clad in dark, simple garb with a crimson sash tied at the waist, had begun appearing at duels across the province. The duelist was swift, precise, and unrelenting—a phantom on the field who seemed to appear out of nowhere, challenge the powerful, and disappear just as quickly. The locals, in awe of the duelist's skill and the striking red sash, took to calling them the **Crimson Phantom**.

Isolde adjusted the mask that concealed the upper half of her face as she waited in the shadow of a crumbling chapel at the edge of the village. The duel she had just won was still fresh in her mind—the sound of steel, the grunts of exertion, the gasp of her opponent as her blade cut across his sword arm, forcing him to yield. The nobleman, bloated with pride and arrogance, had underestimated her, just as they all did. It was a mistake they would not make again.

Her reputation was spreading, and with it, her purpose was becoming clearer. With every duel she won, she chipped away at the corrupt veneer of the court, exposing its hollow core.

But with each victory, she also risked exposure. Her mask could only protect her identity for so long.

In a modest tavern tucked away in the countryside, the buzz of excited conversation filled the air. Merchants, farmers, and travelers leaned in close as one man, a traveling bard, recounted the latest exploits of the Crimson Phantom.

“They say she—or he—moves like a ghost,” the bard said, his voice low and conspiratorial. “Fast as the wind, striking before their opponent even knows what’s happened. Last week, the Phantom humiliated Lord Chauvel in front of half the court. The man’s pride will never recover.”

“Serves him right,” a grizzled farmer muttered, earning nods of agreement from those around him. “Bout time someone showed those nobles they’re not untouchable.”

In the corner of the tavern, Renaud listened silently, his hood pulled low over his face. He nursed a tankard of ale, his lips twitching with a faint smile. His student was making waves, though he doubted anyone in the room would guess the identity of the famed duelist. He had to admit, he was impressed by how quickly Isolde had turned his lessons into real victories. But he also knew the risks she was courting. The nobles she had bested would not take kindly to being made fools of.

He would have to warn her.

The duel the following morning was a spectacle.

The opponent was Sir Alaric de Vienne, a seasoned knight known for his prowess on the battlefield and his arrogance in the court. He had issued a public challenge to the Crimson Phantom, taunting the mysterious duelist as a coward and a fraud. The crowd that gathered in the town square was larger than any Isolde had seen before, the air crackling with anticipation.

As she stepped into the circle, her crimson sash fluttering in the breeze, she felt the weight of their gazes. Some were there to cheer her on, others to see her fall. But all she cared about was the man standing across from her, his plate armor gleaming in the sunlight, his sword raised in a mock salute.

“You’re smaller than I expected,” Alaric said, his voice dripping with disdain. “Perhaps the stories were exaggerated.”

Isolde said nothing, adjusting her grip on her rapier. Her silence unnerved him, though he would never admit it. The crowd hushed as the referee signaled for the duel to begin.

Alaric charged first, his heavy blade slicing through the air with brutal force. Isolde sidestepped gracefully, her movements quick and deliberate. She struck back with a series of precise thrusts, her blade darting like a serpent. Alaric blocked most of them, but his swings grew slower and more erratic as the duel wore on. He was strong, but he was clumsy compared to her agility and finesse.

The crowd erupted in cheers as Isolde disarmed him with a deft flick of her wrist, sending his sword clattering to the ground. Alaric stared at her, his face a mixture of disbelief and fury.

“I yield,” he said through gritted teeth, the words tasting like ash in his mouth.

Isolde lowered her blade, her expression unreadable behind her mask. She offered him a slight bow, then turned and walked away, the crimson sash trailing behind her.

By the time she returned to the clearing where Renaud waited, the cheers of the crowd were a distant memory. She pulled off her mask and slumped against a tree, her breaths shallow. Renaud leaned against a nearby stump, arms crossed, his expression unreadable.

“You’re making enemies,” he said without preamble.

“I know,” Isolde replied, wiping sweat from her brow.

“Powerful enemies,” he added, his tone sharper. “The kind that don’t forget being humiliated.”

Isolde met his gaze, her eyes blazing. “Good. Let them remember me. Let them remember what it feels like to be beaten by someone they thought was beneath them.”

Renaud sighed, shaking his head. “This isn’t a game, Isolde. The more you win, the more they’ll come for you. And when they find out who you really are—”

“They won’t,” she interrupted, her voice firm. “I’ve been careful.”

“Careful only gets you so far,” Renaud muttered. He paused, then added quietly, “You’re good, Isolde. Damn good. But if you’re not careful, all the skill in the world won’t save you from a knife in the back.”

Isolde stood, her expression hardening. “Let them try,” she said. “If they want to kill me, they’ll have to face me first.”

Renaud sighed again, but there was a glimmer of admiration in his eyes. “You’ve got fire, I’ll give you that. Just don’t let it burn you alive.”

As the sun dipped below the horizon, Isolde tightened the crimson sash around her waist. Her victories had earned her fame, but fame was a double-edged sword. And though the blade felt heavy in her hand, she was ready for whatever came next.

The Crimson Phantom had only just begun.

The Grand Hall of Château de Merignac glittered with opulence, its vaulted ceilings adorned with gold filigree and chandeliers dripping with crystals. Nobles in extravagant masks and gowns swirled across the polished marble floor, their laughter and music filling the air like the hum of a hive.

Lady Isolde du Montclair stood at the edge of the room, her hand brushing the crimson sash hidden beneath her flowing emerald gown. Her mask—a delicate piece of black lace dusted

with silver—concealed her features well, but she still felt exposed under the gazes of the court. Every step she took in this treacherous dance was a risk, but she had learned long ago that risks were sometimes the only path to justice.

Her target was unmistakable. Count Merignac, her brother's killer, lounged at the center of the room as though he were a king on his throne. His mask, a gaudy golden piece shaped like the face of a lion, did little to hide his identity. His laughter boomed over the music, and his hand rested possessively on the arm of a young noblewoman who giggled at his every word. He was at ease, utterly unaware of the storm brewing in the shadows.

Isolde's fingers tightened around the stem of her glass as she watched him. Her heart pounded with a mix of rage and anticipation. She had practiced this moment in her mind a hundred times, rehearsed every step of her plan. Tonight, she would make her first move.

A hand touched her elbow, and she turned to see a masked gentleman bowing before her. "May I have this dance?" he asked, his voice smooth but detached.

Isolde smiled politely, shaking her head. "I'm waiting for someone," she replied, her voice steady despite the tension coiling in her chest.

The man nodded and moved on, leaving her alone with her thoughts. She took a deep breath and set down her glass. It was time.

Isolde crossed the room with measured grace, weaving through the throng of dancers and courtiers until she stood just behind the Count. His booming laughter faltered as he turned, his lion mask tilting to regard her. For a moment, he said nothing, his sharp eyes narrowing behind the gilded façade. Then he rose to his feet, his lips curling into a smile.

"To whom do I owe the honor?" he asked, his voice dripping with charm.

Isolde dipped into a low curtsy, her head bowed just enough to feign deference while keeping her gaze locked on him. "A stranger who wishes to share a dance with the lion of the court," she said, her voice soft but steady.

The Count chuckled, clearly pleased with her flattery. "A bold request, but who am I to refuse such a lovely lady?" He extended his hand, and she placed hers in it, her fingers cold against his warm palm.

The music shifted, a lilting waltz filling the room as they moved to the center of the dance floor. Isolde allowed the Count to lead, her steps light and fluid as they glided across the marble. Every movement was precise, every turn calculated. She knew the court's eyes were on them, and she played her part with perfection.

"You're quite skilled," the Count remarked, his tone casual. "Though I must confess, I don't recognize you. Have we met before?"

"Perhaps," Isolde replied with a coy smile. "Or perhaps I am simply a phantom passing through your court."

The Count's smile faltered, just for an instant. "A phantom, you say? How... intriguing." His grip on her hand tightened slightly, and Isolde's pulse quickened. "I've heard rumors of a Crimson Phantom haunting the dueling grounds. I wonder if you've heard of them as well?"

"Who hasn't?" Isolde said, her tone light. "The court buzzes with tales of their exploits. A mysterious duelist, besting noblemen and vanishing into the night—it's the stuff of legend."

The Count's lips twitched, his gaze sharpening. "Indeed. And what do you think of such a figure?"

"I think they are dangerous," she said, her smile fading just enough to appear sincere. "But perhaps danger is what this court needs. Complacency is a slow poison, wouldn't you agree?"

The Count chuckled, but there was a hint of unease in his voice. "You speak boldly for someone I do not know."

"Perhaps boldness is the only way to make an impression," Isolde countered, holding his gaze.

The dance ended, and the crowd applauded politely. The Count stepped back, releasing her hand but not her attention. His eyes lingered on her as if trying to pierce the veil of her mask.

"Who are you?" he asked, his voice quieter now, more curious than charming.

Isolde tilted her head, her smile enigmatic. "A shadow, my lord. Nothing more."

Before he could respond, she turned and disappeared into the crowd, her heart pounding as she wove her way toward the edge of the room. She didn't dare look back, though she could feel the Count's gaze burning into her back.

Renaud waited for her in the shadowed alcove near the side entrance. His arms were crossed, his expression a mix of irritation and concern. "What the hell were you thinking, dancing with him?" he hissed.

"He suspects nothing," Isolde said, her voice steady despite the rush of adrenaline coursing through her veins.

"Not yet," Renaud growled. "But men like him don't forget. You're playing a dangerous game, Isolde."

"I know," she replied, adjusting the mask on her face. "But he won't see the next move coming. That's the point."

Renaud sighed, shaking his head. "You're going to get yourself killed."

"Maybe," Isolde said, her lips curling into a faint smile. "But not tonight."

As they slipped out into the cool night air, Isolde felt a flicker of satisfaction. The Count had taken notice of her, and that was exactly what she wanted. She had planted the seed of doubt, and now she would water it with every move she made.

The lion of the court thought he was untouchable. Soon, he would learn what it felt like to be hunted.

The town square was alive with energy, the cobblestones buzzing beneath the feet of merchants, townsfolk, and nobility alike. Word had spread like wildfire throughout the region: the Crimson Phantom had issued a public challenge to Count Merignac. It was the talk of every tavern and drawing room, the scandalous news stirring excitement and speculation among all classes.

At the center of the square, a raised platform had been hastily constructed, the perfect stage for what promised to be a spectacle. Isolde, masked and clad in her now-signature crimson sash, stood at one end of the platform, her rapier resting lightly in her gloved hand. Her heart thudded in her chest, but her stance was steady, her expression unreadable beneath the mask. This was the moment she had been building toward, and every ounce of her resolve was now fixed on what lay ahead.

The Count had yet to arrive, but the crowd was already growing restless. Murmurs rippled through the throng as they speculated about the identity of the Crimson Phantom. Some praised the duelist's courage, while others sneered at what they considered an outrageous challenge to someone of the Count's stature.

A booming voice cut through the chatter. "Make way for Count Merignac!"

The crowd parted like a tide, and the Count strode forward, his golden lion mask gleaming in the late morning sun. His elaborate cape swept behind him as he climbed onto the platform, his boots thudding against the wooden planks. Behind him stood his entourage, a mix of sycophants and armed guards, their expressions varying between smug amusement and thinly veiled contempt for the masked duelist.

"Well, well," the Count said, his voice carrying over the crowd. He turned toward Isolde, his eyes narrowing behind his mask. "The infamous Crimson Phantom, in the flesh. I admit, I was beginning to think you didn't exist."

Isolde inclined her head slightly, her voice low and calm. "I exist, my lord. And I've come to settle a matter of honor."

The crowd erupted in cheers and gasps. The Count's lips twitched into a smirk as he stepped closer. "Honor, you say? What business does a masked swordsman have with me?"

"You know why I'm here," Isolde said. "You've taken lives and stained your hands with treachery. I've come to give you a chance to defend your name, though it hardly deserves defense."

The crowd's murmurs grew louder, a mix of shock and delight at the audacity of the Phantom's accusation. The Count's smirk faltered for a brief moment before returning, sharper and more menacing.

"You dare accuse me of dishonor in front of my people?" he said, his voice laced with venom. "A coward hiding behind a mask?"

“I hide nothing that matters,” Isolde replied evenly. “And if I am a coward, you have nothing to fear from me. Prove your worth, Count Merignac. Or will you refuse and let the world see what kind of man you truly are?”

The crowd leaned in, breathless. The Count’s jaw tightened, his fingers twitching at his side. Isolde had struck at the core of his pride, and she knew he would never back down now. Not with so many watching.

“Very well,” the Count said, his voice loud and commanding. “I accept your challenge. But be warned, Phantom—whatever reputation you think you’ve built will end here.”

Isolde tilted her head, her voice quiet but firm. “Then let it be so.”

The Count turned to his men, gesturing sharply. “Fetch my blade. This will be over quickly.”

As the guards moved to comply, Isolde glanced toward the edge of the platform, where Renaud stood half-hidden among the onlookers. His expression was tense, his hand resting on the hilt of his dagger. Their eyes met, and he gave a barely perceptible shake of his head.

She knew what he was thinking. This was reckless, dangerous, perhaps even suicidal. But there was no turning back now.

The crowd erupted into cheers and shouts as the Count’s sword was brought forward, a gleaming, jewel-encrusted blade that seemed more suited to ceremonial pomp than actual combat. He tested its balance with an exaggerated flourish, his smirk returning as he faced Isolde once more.

“Name your terms, Phantom,” the Count said, his voice dripping with mockery. “How shall we settle this?”

“First blood,” Isolde replied without hesitation. “A clean strike to disarm or disable. No more, no less.”

The Count’s smirk widened. “How noble of you. I would have expected someone of your... reputation to prefer more savage terms.”

“I leave savagery to men like you,” Isolde said, her tone sharp enough to cut steel.

The referee, a nervous-looking man selected hastily from among the gathered nobles, stepped forward to outline the rules. Both parties nodded their agreement, though Isolde barely listened. Her focus was entirely on the man before her, every muscle in her body coiled like a spring.

The Count, however, seemed relaxed, even bored. He twirled his sword lazily as the referee stepped back, his confidence radiating off him in waves. To him, this was nothing more than a spectacle, a chance to reaffirm his dominance in front of the court.

The crowd fell silent as the referee raised his hand. “En garde,” he said, his voice trembling slightly. “Begin!”

Isolde raised her rapier, the tip steady as it pointed toward her opponent. The Count lunged first, his blade flashing toward her with surprising speed. She sidestepped easily, her movements fluid and precise. The crowd roared as the two combatants began their deadly dance, their blades clashing in bursts of sparks.

Though the Count moved with confidence, Isolde could see the flaws in his technique. He relied too much on brute strength, his strikes wide and showy. She parried each attack with ease, her movements economical, her focus unshakable.

The duel wasn't just a battle of skill—it was a test of wills. Every strike, every dodge, every moment of silence between them was charged with meaning. Isolde could feel the weight of the crowd's gaze, the anticipation of her mentor, the memory of her brother driving her forward.

The duel dragged on, the tension building with each clash of steel. The Count's confidence began to falter, his strikes growing more erratic as he realized his opponent was not the novice he had assumed. Isolde pressed her advantage, her blade moving faster, closer, cutting through his defenses like water through stone.

Finally, she stopped just short of landing a decisive blow, her blade poised near his throat. The Count stumbled back, his face pale, his chest heaving. The crowd erupted in cheers, their cries of "Crimson Phantom!" ringing through the square.

The referee stepped forward, raising his hand. "The terms have been set. The duel will begin tomorrow at sunrise!"

Isolde lowered her blade, her heart pounding with exhilaration. The trap was set, and the Count had walked straight into it. As she stepped down from the platform, she glanced toward Renaud, who met her gaze with a mixture of pride and apprehension.

The lion of the court thought he had faced the Crimson Phantom. Tomorrow, he would face the full force of Lady Isolde du Montclair's wrath.

The Code of Blood

The air was thick with dust and the acrid smell of sweat and fear as the villagers gathered in the clearing. The once-quiet square, shaded by the towering oaks, had become a makeshift arena, its edges marked by hastily laid stones and the fearful murmurs of the crowd. At the center stood Étienne, his lean, wiry frame coiled with tension, his sword hanging loosely at his side. He was a man of few words, and none were needed now. His presence alone spoke of resolve.

Across from him loomed a brute of a man, clad in battered armor that gleamed faintly under the waning sun. The champion of the local warlord—known only as Garran the Bear—grinned, his teeth yellowed and jagged, as he hefted a blade almost too large to be called a sword. It was more like a cleaver, its weight alone capable of cleaving a man in two. The villagers recoiled as Garran swung it in an exaggerated arc, his laughter rolling across the square.

“Is this it?” Garran bellowed, his voice a guttural sneer. “This is the best your village can muster? A scrawny rat who looks like he’d snap in half at the first swing?”

The crowd murmured anxiously, their fear palpable. Étienne said nothing. His dark eyes never left Garran, his expression unreadable. He shifted his stance slightly, his grip on the hilt of his sword tightening. His weapon was simple and unadorned, its blade well-worn but honed to razor sharpness. It was a tool, not a symbol, and Étienne wielded it with the quiet confidence of a man who understood its purpose.

“Enough talking,” Étienne said at last, his voice low and steady. “Let’s get this over with.”

The warlord himself sat on a raised platform at the edge of the clearing, surrounded by his guards. A thick, imposing figure draped in furs, he watched the scene unfold with a bored expression, as though the outcome were already decided. “Begin,” he called, waving a hand lazily.

Garran’s grin widened as he lunged forward, his massive blade cutting through the air with terrifying force. The villagers gasped, their collective breath held as the blade descended toward Étienne. But the swordsman was already moving, his body a blur as he sidestepped the attack. The cleaver smashed into the ground, sending up a cloud of dust and splinters.

Before Garran could recover, Étienne struck. His sword lashed out in a quick, precise arc, slicing a shallow line across Garran’s forearm. The brute bellowed in pain, stumbling back as blood seeped through the gash. The crowd erupted in startled cheers, hope sparking in their eyes for the first time.

“You’ll pay for that, rat!” Garran roared, his grip on his cleaver tightening. He charged again, his attacks wild and furious, each swing meant to obliterate rather than wound. Étienne danced around him, his movements fluid and controlled, his sword darting out like a serpent to deliver another cut, and then another. None were fatal, but each strike chipped away at Garran’s strength and resolve.

The duel was more than a battle of strength; it was a test of discipline, patience, and will. Garran fought like a beast, driven by rage and instinct. Étienne, by contrast, fought with the precision of a craftsman, every movement calculated, every strike purposeful. He didn’t waste energy, didn’t overcommit. He let Garran exhaust himself, parrying the heavier man’s blows with deft ease.

“You’re slowing down,” Étienne said, his tone calm, almost conversational. “Is that all the Bear has?”

Garran’s face twisted in fury, and he lunged recklessly, swinging his cleaver in a wide arc. Étienne sidestepped again, his blade flashing upward to catch Garran’s exposed flank. The

brute howled as blood sprayed across the dirt, his massive frame buckling under the pain. He dropped to one knee, his breaths ragged.

The villagers erupted in cheers, their voices rising like a tide, but Étienne's focus didn't waver. He stepped forward, his sword leveled at Garran's throat. "Yield," he said, his voice cutting through the din.

Garran glared up at him, his teeth clenched, his body trembling with fury and pain. For a moment, it seemed he might lunge again, but then his shoulders sagged. "I yield," he spat, the words bitter in his mouth.

The warlord rose from his seat, his expression unreadable. His guards tensed, their hands on the hilts of their swords, but the warlord raised a hand to stop them. "Enough," he said, his voice cold. "The rat has proven himself."

The villagers erupted in celebration, rushing forward to surround Étienne. He allowed their gratitude for a brief moment, his face betraying no emotion. But his gaze remained fixed on the warlord, who watched him with a calculating expression.

"You've earned your village another week of peace," the warlord said, his tone mocking. "But know this, swordsman: your skill won't save them forever. Cross me again, and no amount of fancy swordplay will stop what comes next."

Étienne nodded, his grip on his sword tightening. "Then you'd better make sure I'm not around when you try."

The warlord chuckled, a low, menacing sound, before turning and stalking away with his entourage. The villagers cheered again, their voices filled with relief, but Étienne felt no joy. This victory, like so many others, was hollow. It was a reprieve, not a solution. The warlord would return, and next time, the stakes would be even higher.

As the crowd began to disperse, a young boy tugged at Étienne's sleeve. "You saved us," the boy said, his wide eyes filled with awe. "You're a hero."

Étienne looked down at him, his expression softening for a moment. "A hero?" he murmured. "No. Just a man with a sword."

The boy's smile faltered, but Étienne ruffled his hair before turning away, his mind already racing with thoughts of what lay ahead. If he was to protect his village, he would need more than skill. He would need allies, resources, and a plan.

As the sun set over the clearing, Étienne sheathed his sword and walked into the shadows, ready to face whatever came next.

The morning after the duel, Étienne found no peace. The village, still buzzing with the shock and relief of their survival, seemed determined to make him their hero. As he walked the muddy main street, his sword sheathed and slung low at his hip, people stopped him at every turn.

“Étienne! You saved us!” an elderly woman exclaimed, gripping his arm with surprising strength. “I thought for sure Garran would destroy us all.”

“You’ve done what no one else could,” a farmer chimed in, tipping his hat. “A true champion.”

Étienne gave polite nods, his face calm but his thoughts elsewhere. It wasn’t that he disliked their gratitude—he understood their desperation. But to him, it was just another fight, another victory that came with its own burdens. The warlord would return. Garran’s defeat might have bought the village time, but it had also painted a target squarely on Étienne’s back.

He slipped into the shadowed corner of a tavern, hoping to escape the attention. The room smelled of stale ale and damp wood, but it was quiet, and that was all he wanted. Sitting at a corner table, Étienne nursed a drink, his eyes fixed on the swirling patterns in the wood grain as he thought of his next move.

“Fancy blade work yesterday.” A voice cut through his solitude like the scrape of a knife.

Étienne’s eyes flicked up to see three men standing near his table, their rough attire and hardened faces marking them as mercenaries. The one who had spoken—a lanky man with a scar running down his cheek—grinned, revealing crooked teeth.

“We watched the whole thing,” Scar said, sliding into the chair opposite Étienne without waiting for an invitation. The other two flanked him, their hands casually resting on the hilts of their weapons. “You’ve got talent, boy. Talent that could make you rich.”

Étienne’s hand tightened around his mug, though his expression remained neutral. “I’m not interested.”

Scar leaned forward, his grin widening. “Don’t be so quick to dismiss opportunity. The warlord’s got a long reach, and it won’t be long before he comes back with more men. You think you can stand against him alone? You need allies—real allies. Men like us.”

Étienne studied the man for a long moment. He could see the greed in his eyes, the hunger for power and coin that drove men like him. Scar wasn’t offering help; he was offering chains.

“I don’t need mercenaries,” Étienne said, his voice calm but firm. “And I don’t fight for gold.”

Scar chuckled, shaking his head. “Every man fights for something. If it ain’t gold, then it’s survival. And right now, you’ve got neither.”

The other men laughed, their voices low and threatening. Étienne’s fingers brushed the hilt of his sword, his movements slow and deliberate.

“Let me make this clear,” he said, his voice cutting through their laughter. “I don’t need your help. And if you try to press me, you’ll regret it.”

Scar’s grin faded, replaced by a cold, calculating look. “Careful, boy. You’ve made some enemies already, and you don’t want to add us to the list.”

Étienne stood, his chair scraping loudly against the floor. The tavern fell silent as heads turned to watch the standoff. He leaned forward, his dark eyes locking onto Scar's. "I don't make lists. But if you're looking for a fight, I'll oblige."

The room seemed to hold its breath. For a moment, Scar appeared ready to draw his blade, his hand twitching at his side. But then he leaned back, raising his hands in mock surrender. "No need for violence. Not yet, anyway."

He stood, his men following suit, and tipped an imaginary hat to Étienne. "We'll be seeing you, swordsman. Whether you like it or not."

As they left, the tavern buzzed with murmurs, the patrons casting curious and wary glances at Étienne. He finished his drink and left without a word, the weight of the encounter settling heavily on his shoulders.

Later that evening, Étienne returned to the outskirts of the village, where the quiet fields stretched endlessly under the twilight sky. He needed space to think, to plan. The fight with Garran had been a challenge, but it was clear now that his victory had drawn more than the villagers' admiration. It had drawn attention—unwanted and dangerous.

Mercenaries like Scar were just the beginning. Word of his skill would spread, reaching ears far beyond the warlord's territory. He would become a symbol of defiance, a rallying point for the desperate—and a target for the powerful.

As he sat beneath a lone tree, his sword resting across his lap, Étienne considered his options. He could leave the village, disappear into the wilderness and avoid the coming storm. But that would mean abandoning the people who now looked to him for protection. He had no love for heroism, but he couldn't stomach the thought of leaving them defenseless.

The other option was far more dangerous: to stay, to fight, and to face whatever challenges came his way. It would mean risking everything—his life, his freedom, his future. But it would also mean standing for something, something greater than himself.

Étienne sighed, his grip tightening on the hilt of his sword. He wasn't a hero. He wasn't even sure he was a good man. But he knew one thing: he wouldn't run.

The first stars began to appear in the darkening sky, their faint light reflecting off the blade of his sword. Étienne gazed at them for a long moment, his thoughts silent, his resolve hardening.

If they wanted to test his strength, they would get their chance. But they would soon learn that Étienne was no one's pawn. He would fight on his own terms, for his own reasons.

And he would not fall.

The campfire crackled in the cool night air, its flickering flames casting long shadows over the gathered men. Étienne sat apart from the others, his sword resting against his knee as he stared into the flames. The decision to join the mercenary band had not been easy, and he was far from certain he had made the right one. But the reality was stark: if he refused, his family

and the village would have no protection against the warlord's inevitable return. Scar's words, dripping with smug certainty, had cut to the heart of the matter.

"Better the devil you know," Étienne muttered to himself, though the words rang hollow.

Scar, the self-appointed leader of the group, was holding court near the fire, regaling the men with exaggerated tales of past conquests. The other mercenaries—an unruly mix of grizzled veterans and reckless youths—laughed and jeered at his stories, their camaraderie coarse but genuine. Étienne had not yet joined in their revelry, nor did he plan to. He kept to himself, his thoughts dark and his purpose clear.

"You'll warm up to them eventually," a voice said behind him.

Étienne turned to see a wiry man with sharp eyes and a crooked smile leaning against a tree. He recognized him as Dax, one of Scar's lieutenants. Unlike the others, Dax seemed to carry himself with a calm, almost detached air, as though he were watching everything from a distance.

"I doubt it," Étienne replied, his voice flat.

Dax chuckled and sat beside him, pulling a flask from his belt. "You're not the first to come here thinking you're better than the rest of us. But let me tell you something, friend: survival makes fools of us all."

Étienne didn't respond, his eyes still fixed on the fire. Dax took a swig from his flask, then held it out. Étienne shook his head.

"Suit yourself," Dax said, shrugging. "But you should know—there's no going back now. Scar doesn't take kindly to deserters."

"I'm not here for Scar," Étienne said quietly. "I'm here to protect my family."

Dax tilted his head, studying Étienne. "A noble sentiment," he said, his tone edged with skepticism. "But you'll find that the line between protecting and destroying is thinner than you think."

Their first mission was a simple one—at least on the surface. A wealthy merchant had refused to pay his "taxes" to a local noble, and Scar's group was hired to make an example of him. Étienne rode in silence as the band approached the merchant's estate, his jaw tight and his stomach churning. He had agreed to join the mercenaries to protect his people, but this felt wrong. He wasn't here to terrorize innocents.

When they reached the estate, Scar ordered the men to ransack the property. Étienne stayed back, his hand resting on his sword but his feet rooted to the ground. He watched as the others stormed the house, dragging the merchant and his family into the courtyard. The man pleaded for mercy, his voice trembling as he clutched his wife and young daughter.

Scar approached the merchant, his grin wide and his voice mocking. "You've got a choice," he said, leaning in close. "Pay what you owe, with interest, or lose everything."

“I don’t have it,” the merchant stammered. “Please, I just need more time—”

Scar struck him across the face, sending him sprawling to the ground. The wife screamed, clutching her daughter tighter. Étienne’s hand tightened on his sword, his heart pounding as anger and disgust roiled within him.

“Enough,” Étienne said, his voice cutting through the chaos.

The men turned to look at him, surprise flickering across their faces. Scar straightened, his grin fading as he stepped toward Étienne.

“What did you say?” Scar asked, his tone dangerous.

“This isn’t what I signed up for,” Étienne said, his voice steady despite the tension in the air. “We’re mercenaries, not butchers. Let them go.”

Scar laughed, a harsh sound that echoed across the courtyard. “You’ve got a lot to learn, boy. This is the job. If you can’t handle it, you’re in the wrong place.”

Étienne stepped forward, his hand resting on the hilt of his sword. “Let them go,” he repeated, his tone firmer. “Or you’ll be the one needing mercy.”

The air crackled with tension as the two men stared each other down. Scar’s grin returned, though it didn’t reach his eyes. After a moment, he raised his hands in mock surrender.

“Fine,” he said, turning to the merchant. “You’ve got your reprieve, thanks to your new guardian angel. But don’t think this is over.”

The men grumbled as they released the family, their disappointment clear. Étienne watched them go, his muscles taut, his heart pounding in his chest. He had won this round, but he knew it wouldn’t be the last.

The missions grew darker, each one testing Étienne’s resolve and pushing the boundaries of his morality. Scar’s group took contracts from nobles, merchants, and criminals alike, their loyalty tied only to coin. Étienne found himself in skirmishes against rival bands, raids on isolated farms, and ambushes along lonely roads. Each mission was bloodier than the last, the stakes higher, the lines blurrier.

At night, he lay awake, the faces of the people he had harmed haunting him. He told himself it was for his family, for his village, but the excuses felt hollow. He was becoming the very thing he had sworn to fight against—a weapon in the hands of the powerful, used to oppress the weak.

Dax’s words echoed in his mind: “The line between protecting and destroying is thinner than you think.”

One night, as the group camped in a forest clearing, Étienne approached Dax. “How do you live with it?” he asked, his voice quiet.

Dax looked up from sharpening his blade, his expression unreadable. “With what?”

“The things we’ve done. The people we’ve hurt.”

Dax sighed, setting his blade aside. “You don’t. You just keep moving. If you stop to think too long, it’ll eat you alive.”

Étienne nodded slowly, though the answer gave him little comfort. He turned away, his gaze shifting to the stars above. He had made his choice, and now he had to live with it.

But deep down, he wondered how long he could walk this path before it destroyed him completely.

The camp was unusually quiet as Étienne approached Scar’s tent, the flickering firelight casting long, restless shadows across the clearing. The men had been tense for days, whispering about their next mission, their hushed voices laced with unease. Étienne had grown accustomed to their darker contracts, but this one had the feel of something different. Something worse.

He ducked inside the tent, where Scar and his lieutenants were seated around a map sprawled across a battered wooden table. Scar looked up, his scarred face illuminated by the warm glow of a lantern, a sly grin tugging at his lips.

“Ah, Étienne,” Scar said, gesturing for him to step closer. “Good timing. We’ve got a special job, and you’re just the man for it.”

Étienne crossed his arms, his jaw tightening. “What’s the target?”

Scar’s grin widened, but there was no humor in it. “Not a what. A who.”

He pointed to a marked location on the map, the outskirts of a nearby estate. “The noblewoman who’s been stirring up trouble—Lady Isolde du Montclair. The Duke himself wants her silenced, and he’s paying handsomely to make sure she disappears.”

Étienne froze, his blood running cold. The name struck him like a hammer, a memory surfacing unbidden. He had heard whispers of Lady Isolde—a noblewoman turned duelist, rumored to be the elusive Crimson Phantom. Stories of her defiance had reached even the lowest circles of the court, painting her as both a hero and a menace.

“And you want me to do it?” Étienne asked, his voice low and even.

Scar leaned back, folding his hands behind his head. “You’re the best we’ve got. Quick, quiet, and efficient. Get in, take her out, and we’ll be swimming in coin by the week’s end.”

Étienne’s jaw tightened. He glanced around the tent, noting the watchful eyes of Scar’s lieutenants. They were waiting for his response, their expressions unreadable. Étienne forced himself to breathe, his mind racing.

This was different. This wasn’t a raid on a farm or a skirmish with another mercenary band. This was murder—pure and simple. And not just any murder. Isolde was fighting against the same kind of corruption that had ruined so many lives, including his own. To kill her would be to destroy everything he still believed in.

“No,” Étienne said finally, his voice firm.

The word hung in the air like a challenge. Scar’s grin faltered, and the room grew deadly silent.

“No?” Scar repeated, leaning forward, his eyes narrowing dangerously. “Did I hear that right?”

“You heard me,” Étienne said, his gaze locked on Scar’s. “I won’t do it.”

Scar’s smirk disappeared entirely, replaced by a cold, calculating expression. He stood slowly, his hands resting on the table. “You don’t get to say no, Étienne. Not in this line of work. You don’t want the job? Fine. But refusing it? That makes you a problem.”

“I’m not killing her,” Étienne said, his tone unwavering. “Find someone else.”

Scar’s eyes darkened, his voice dropping to a low growl. “You’ve got a choice, boy. Do the job, or you’re done here.”

Étienne squared his shoulders. “Then I’m done.”

The lieutenants exchanged uneasy glances, but no one spoke. Scar stepped around the table, his movements slow and deliberate, like a predator circling its prey. He stopped in front of Étienne, his face inches away.

“You don’t walk away from this, Étienne,” Scar said, his voice like steel. “You walk away from me, and you’re a traitor. You know what happens to traitors.”

Étienne’s hand drifted to the hilt of his sword. “If you want to try, I won’t stop you.”

For a moment, the tent was silent, the tension thick enough to choke. Then Scar laughed, a harsh, humorless sound. He stepped back, raising his hands in mock surrender. “Fine,” he said. “You’re out. But don’t think this is over.”

He turned to the lieutenants, his grin returning. “Spread the word. Étienne’s no longer one of us. He’s fair game.”

Étienne left the camp that night, his belongings packed hastily into a worn satchel. The forest seemed darker than usual, the rustle of leaves and distant howls putting him on edge. He knew the mercenaries wouldn’t let him go easily. Scar’s pride wouldn’t allow it.

As he walked, his thoughts churned. He had made the right choice—he was certain of that. But the cost would be high. The mercenaries would hunt him, and if they caught him, they wouldn’t hesitate to make an example of him. Worse still, the Duke’s reach was vast, and his wrath was not easily escaped.

But Étienne didn’t regret his decision. He would not become a blade for hire, wielded by the powerful against those who dared to defy them. He had spent too long on the wrong side of the line, and he would not cross it again.

By dawn, Étienne had reached the edge of a quiet village nestled in the hills. He kept his head low, his hood pulled tight as he sought refuge in the shadows. He would need to move quickly, to stay ahead of Scar's men. But he would not run forever.

He thought of Lady Isolde, the woman he had refused to kill. He didn't know her, but he knew her cause, and it was one he could no longer ignore. Perhaps their paths would cross. Perhaps they wouldn't.

Either way, Étienne was done running from his past. It was time to fight for something that mattered.

Étienne moved swiftly through the dense forest, his breath steady but his mind restless. The sound of his own footsteps was muted by the soft earth beneath him, yet every rustle of leaves and snap of a twig sent a spike of caution through his chest. Scar's men were hunting him now—he was sure of it. He had slipped away before they could act on Scar's orders, but he knew their pursuit would come soon enough.

He needed a plan, a purpose beyond mere survival. Something that would give meaning to the decisions he'd made and the lives he'd left behind. His thoughts turned to the noblewoman, Lady Isolde, the target he had refused to kill. He had heard the stories of her exploits, the whispers of a masked duelist challenging the powerful and exposing their corruption. If half of what they said was true, she was more than just a target—she was a symbol of defiance.

Perhaps she could use a sword at her side. Or perhaps, Étienne thought grimly, it was his way of finding the redemption that had eluded him for so long.

The village at the base of the valley was his first stop. A quiet, unremarkable place, it was the kind of hamlet where gossip flowed faster than the rivers. Étienne kept his head low as he walked through the narrow streets, listening to the chatter of merchants and farmers. He heard no mention of Scar's men, which gave him a sliver of relief, but there was another name that seemed to be on everyone's lips.

"The Crimson Phantom struck again last night," a merchant said, loading crates onto a cart. "Challenged Lord Varo to a duel and left him humiliated. That makes three this month."

"They say it's a man," a woman replied, wiping her hands on her apron. "But I heard from a traveler that it's a lady, noble-born."

Étienne stopped, his ears pricking at the familiar rumors. Isolde was here, or at least nearby. He approached the merchant, feigning casual interest.

"Where did you say this Phantom was last seen?" Étienne asked.

The merchant eyed him warily. "Why do you ask?"

Étienne shrugged. "Call it curiosity. I've heard the stories."

The merchant hesitated before pointing toward the hills. "The dueling grounds near the old mill. That's where they fought Lord Varo."

Étienne nodded his thanks and turned away, his path now clear. If Isolde was the Crimson Phantom, as he suspected, then he needed to find her. And he needed to make her understand that he wasn't an enemy.

The old mill was quiet when Étienne arrived, its weathered frame leaning precariously against the hillside. The dueling ground nearby was marked by scuffed dirt and the remnants of past contests—discarded gloves, broken blades, and faint traces of blood. Étienne approached cautiously, his hand resting on the hilt of his sword.

“You’re bold to come here unannounced.”

The voice was sharp and commanding, cutting through the stillness like a blade. Étienne turned to see a figure step out from the shadows of the mill. She was dressed plainly, but the crimson sash tied at her waist was unmistakable. A mask concealed the upper half of her face, but there was no mistaking the intensity of her gaze.

“Lady Isolde,” Étienne said, inclining his head slightly. “Or should I call you the Crimson Phantom?”

She didn't lower her guard, her hand hovering near the hilt of her rapier. “Who are you, and what do you want?”

“My name is Étienne,” he said. “Until recently, I was part of Scar’s mercenary band.”

Her posture tensed at the mention of Scar, but she said nothing, waiting for him to continue.

“I was sent to kill you,” he admitted, his voice steady. “But I refused.”

Isolde’s eyes narrowed behind the mask. “And why should I believe that?”

“Because I’m standing here, unarmed,” he said, raising his hands slightly to show he meant no harm. “Scar branded me a traitor for refusing the contract. His men are hunting me now. I have nowhere else to go.”

She studied him for a long moment, her expression unreadable. “And you expect me to trust you? To welcome you into my fight after what you’ve done?”

“I don’t expect anything,” Étienne said. “But I know what it’s like to fight for the wrong side. I’ve done things I’m not proud of. Things I’ll never be able to undo. But I can still choose to fight for something better.”

Isolde’s gaze softened slightly, though her hand remained near her sword. “And you think helping me will make up for your sins?”

Étienne shook his head. “No. Redemption isn’t that simple. But I can put my blade to better use. I can help you. And maybe, in time, I’ll find a way to make peace with myself.”

She hesitated, her grip on her rapier loosening as she considered his words. Finally, she lowered her hand and stepped closer.

“Prove it,” she said. “If you truly want to help me, you’ll have to earn my trust.”

Étienne nodded. “Tell me what you need.”

Isolde turned away, her gaze sweeping over the distant hills. “The Duke of Laroque has spies and soldiers in every corner of the province. If we’re going to stop him, we need to know his next move. There’s a shipment coming through the southern pass tomorrow—gold meant to bribe the Count of Merignac into backing the Duke’s plans. I intend to intercept it.”

Étienne’s lips quirked into a faint smile. “A bold plan.”

She glanced at him, her expression cool. “Are you in or not?”

Étienne drew his sword, the blade catching the fading sunlight. “I’m in.”

The alliance was fragile, born of necessity and shared enemies, but it was a start. As they moved to prepare for the mission, Étienne felt a spark of something he hadn’t felt in years—hope. For the first time in a long time, he wasn’t just fighting to survive. He was fighting for something that mattered.

The King’s Challenge

The King’s herald rode into the capital square at dawn, his armor gleaming in the early light as his trumpet rang out, silencing the bustling market. Merchants paused mid-barter, and nobles halted their carriages as the herald dismounted, unfurling a scroll adorned with the royal crest. A hush fell over the crowd, the air heavy with expectation.

“By decree of His Majesty King Philippe the Second,” the herald proclaimed, his voice booming across the cobblestones, “a grand tournament shall be held in one month’s time to celebrate the unity of the realm and to honor the noble houses of this great kingdom.”

The murmur of excitement began to ripple through the crowd as the herald continued. “All who wish to test their skill in the arts of combat are invited to compete. The victors shall be granted gold, glory, and the favor of the King himself. Let the bold step forward, and let their blades speak for them!”

In the shadow of a bustling inn, Gabriel d’Artois leaned against a weathered post, his arms crossed as he listened to the herald’s announcement. His face remained impassive, but his mind churned. A royal tournament was no ordinary affair. It was more than a display of skill or a chance for young knights to prove their mettle—it was a battlefield of politics and power. Gabriel had spent enough years at court to know that much.

The King's timing was deliberate. Rumors of unrest among the noble houses had been swirling for months, whispers of feuds, alliances, and betrayals threatening to tear the realm apart. A tournament would serve as a stage to remind the nobles of the King's power, to distract them with spectacle, and perhaps to uncover who among them posed the greatest threat.

Gabriel sighed, running a hand through his graying hair. He had no desire to return to the world of politics and intrigue, but something about this tournament gnawed at him. His instincts warned him that there was more to this event than a show of unity. He didn't know what role he would play, but he felt the pull of the inevitable. His blade would be needed again, whether he liked it or not.

In a small camp on the outskirts of the capital, Isolde du Montclair paced the perimeter, her crimson sash fluttering in the breeze. Étienne sat nearby, sharpening his sword as he watched her with quiet curiosity.

"You've been restless all morning," Étienne remarked, testing the edge of his blade.

"I heard the announcement," Isolde said without breaking stride. "The King's tournament."

Étienne nodded. "Word travels fast. And I suppose you're considering entering?"

Isolde stopped, turning to face him. Her jaw was set, her eyes burning with determination. "Considering? No. I'm certain."

Étienne raised an eyebrow. "You do realize the risks, don't you? The King's court will be crawling with spies, soldiers, and nobles who'd love nothing more than to see you unmasked."

"That's exactly why I have to go," Isolde said, her voice firm. "The Duke will be there. His allies will be watching. If I can get close enough, I can gather information—find out what his next move is."

Étienne studied her for a moment before nodding. "And the tournament? Are you entering to win, or just to make a statement?"

"Both," Isolde said without hesitation. "Every duel I fight, every noble I defeat, will remind them that they are not untouchable. And if I find the chance to strike at the Duke or his allies, I won't hesitate."

Étienne leaned back, a faint smirk playing on his lips. "You're nothing if not ambitious."

"And you?" Isolde asked, crossing her arms. "Will you join me?"

Étienne shrugged. "A chance to fight against the best swordsmen in the kingdom? Why not? Besides, someone has to keep you out of trouble."

Isolde allowed herself a small smile. "Good. Then we'll leave at first light."

The royal court was abuzz with preparations. Tents were being raised, pavilions adorned with the colors of the noble houses, and the training yards were filled with the sound of steel on steel as competitors honed their skills. The grand tournament promised to be the event of the year, and its stakes were higher than most realized.

For Gabriel, the decision to participate came reluctantly. He was no longer the man who sought glory or favor, but his instincts told him that the tournament was a trap—one that he needed to understand if he hoped to protect those he cared about.

For Isolde, the tournament was an opportunity. The King's court was a viper's nest, but she would walk boldly into it, her mask concealing her true identity and her blade speaking for her when words failed.

And for Étienne, the tournament was a chance to prove himself. He had spent years fighting in the shadows, his skills honed in battlefields and back alleys. Now, he would face the best the kingdom had to offer, not as a mercenary, but as a warrior with a cause.

As the first competitors arrived at the gates of the capital, the stage was set. Beneath the surface of the royal pageantry, alliances were forming, plots were brewing, and swords were being sharpened for more than just the arena.

Each step they took toward the tournament brought them closer to danger, closer to the truths they sought—and closer to the reckoning that awaited them all.

The tournament grounds were alive with color and sound, a spectacle designed to dazzle and distract. Pavilions in every hue of the noble spectrum stretched across the field, bearing the banners of their houses. Herald's announced the names of the participants with booming voices, while trumpeters heralded each event. Vendors wove through the throng, hawking roasted meats, chilled wines, and brightly dyed silks. The air crackled with excitement, a tension born of both rivalry and celebration.

Gabriel d'Artois moved through the crowd with practiced ease, his keen eyes observing every detail. He wore no house colors, no identifying marks. To the other attendees, he was just another aging swordsman drawn to the tournament for reasons best left unsaid. That was precisely how he wanted it.

The answers he sought lay buried beneath the pomp and pageantry. He had already noticed the Duke of Laroque seated in a shaded gallery near the royal box, his expression impassive as he watched the opening matches. Gabriel's stomach tightened at the sight of him. The Duke had been the puppet master behind Philippe's death, of that Gabriel was certain. But certainty wasn't enough. He needed proof, and the tournament offered a chance to unearth it.

Nearby, a group of young nobles laughed raucously, their armor shining and their egos brimming. Gabriel slowed his pace, listening as they discussed their matches and wagers. The names they mentioned—participants, sponsors, and influential spectators—formed a web of connections Gabriel would need to untangle.

His eyes drifted to the arena, where a pair of swordsmen clashed in a display of raw power. The crowd roared as one competitor disarmed the other with a spectacular move, his blade spinning in the sunlight before clattering to the ground. Gabriel barely registered the victory.

His thoughts were on Philippe, on the boy's wide-eyed hope and the blood that had stained the cobblestones of his final duel. Gabriel had failed him then. He wouldn't fail again.

At the edge of the grounds, Isolde tightened the straps of her armor, adjusting the weight of the sword at her hip. Her crimson sash was absent, replaced by plain, unremarkable attire that allowed her to blend in among the other competitors. Her mask—a simpler, more functional piece than the one she wore as the Crimson Phantom—concealed her identity, while her hair was bound tightly beneath a hood.

Étienne approached, his own armor battered but serviceable. He carried his sword with a casual ease, his expression unreadable. “You’re sure about this?” he asked.

“I didn’t come this far to watch from the sidelines,” Isolde replied, her voice low but firm. “The Count will be here. I have to face him.”

“And if he recognizes you?”

“He won’t,” she said. “Not until it’s too late.”

Étienne gave a small nod, though his eyes were wary. “Just remember: the arena’s not the only battlefield here. The nobles are watching, and their daggers are sharper than any blade in this tournament.”

Isolde allowed herself a faint smile. “Then let them watch.”

Together, they stepped into the competitors’ pavilion, where warriors of all kinds prepared for their matches. Knights in gleaming armor whispered prayers to their gods, while mercenaries sharpened their blades with quiet precision. Isolde’s presence drew little attention, just as she had hoped. To them, she was just another hopeful seeking glory. None of them knew the fire that burned beneath her calm exterior.

The tournament’s opening matches were a spectacle of skill and savagery. Swords clashed, shields splintered, and spears flew with deadly precision. The crowd roared with every victory, their cheers a thunderous wave that echoed across the field. But beneath the surface of the spectacle, currents of intrigue swirled like unseen predators.

Gabriel moved from the royal gallery to the noble pavilions, listening and observing. The Duke of Laroque’s men were everywhere, their movements careful but unmistakable to a trained eye. Gabriel noted their interactions, the whispered exchanges with other nobles, the subtle nods and gestures that spoke of alliances and schemes. He caught snatches of conversation—mentions of debts, favors, and rivalries—all pieces of a puzzle he was determined to solve.

In the arena, Isolde’s first match was called. She stepped forward, her posture calm and composed as she faced a towering knight in gilded armor. The crowd murmured, skeptical of her chances against such an imposing opponent. But Isolde was no stranger to doubt. She drew her sword with a practiced ease, her movements precise and deliberate.

The match began with the knight charging forward, his massive blade cutting through the air with brutal force. Isolde sidestepped gracefully, her smaller frame allowing her to dodge the

blow with ease. She struck back with a quick thrust, her blade grazing the knight's arm and drawing first blood. The crowd gasped, their skepticism giving way to interest.

The fight continued, Isolde's speed and precision outmatching the knight's raw strength. With a final feint and riposte, she disarmed him, her blade pointed at his throat. The referee declared her the winner, and the crowd erupted in cheers. Isolde lowered her sword and stepped back, her heart pounding as she met the gaze of the Duke, seated high above the arena. His expression remained impassive, but she could feel his attention on her.

As she left the arena, Étienne was waiting. "Impressive," he said, his tone neutral. "But you're drawing attention."

"Good," Isolde replied. "I want them to notice."

Étienne sighed, shaking his head. "Just don't get yourself killed proving a point."

Gabriel, watching from the edge of the crowd, caught sight of Isolde as she disappeared into the pavilion. He recognized her movements, her deliberate skill. The pieces were beginning to connect, though he wasn't sure what picture they would form. For now, he focused on the task at hand: unraveling the Duke's web of lies.

The tournament continued, each match a step closer to the truth for Gabriel, to vengeance for Isolde, and to redemption for Étienne. But as the stakes rose and the blades grew sharper, the risks multiplied. The King's challenge was more than a test of skill. It was a crucible that would reveal not just the strongest, but the most dangerous players in the game.

Étienne stood at the edge of the arena, his fingers wrapped tightly around the hilt of his sword as the crowd roared with anticipation. Across from him, two of Scar's men—grinning like wolves—readied their weapons. Their armor bore the familiar scars of countless battles, and their eyes glinted with malice. Étienne could hear their taunts even over the cheers of the spectators.

"Didn't think you'd make it this far, traitor," one of them sneered, a hulking brute named Garon. His axe rested heavily on his shoulder, but he swung it with unsettling ease. "Guess we'll have to remind you what happens to those who cross Scar."

The other, a wiry man with twin daggers strapped to his hips, chuckled. "Been a long time since we've had this much fun in the open."

Étienne said nothing. He shifted his stance, his body tense but his mind calm. This wasn't the battlefield he had grown accustomed to, but the stakes were the same—his life, and the lives of those he meant to protect. He glanced toward the royal box, where the King sat surrounded by advisors and guards. The monarch's face was unreadable, but Étienne could feel the weight of his gaze, as if the King himself were assessing his worth.

The referee stepped forward, his voice cutting through the din. "This match is to the death!"

Étienne's jaw tightened, though he wasn't surprised. As the tournament progressed, the bouts had grown bloodier, the rules harsher. What had begun as a grand display of skill and unity

now seemed more like a carefully orchestrated purge. Étienne's thoughts raced as the referee signaled for the fight to begin.

Garon charged first, his axe slicing through the air with brutal force. Étienne sidestepped, the blade missing him by inches, and countered with a quick slash to Garon's side. The brute growled, his armor deflecting most of the blow, but it was enough to slow him.

The wiry man darted in next, his daggers moving like twin vipers. Étienne parried one strike and barely dodged the other, his sword cutting an arc through the air as he forced his opponent back. The crowd roared, their bloodlust palpable.

Étienne knew this wasn't just a fight—it was a test. The King's tournament wasn't about honor or glory. It was a crucible, designed to eliminate those who posed a threat to the crown's stability. The dissenters, the rebels, the ambitious—all would bleed in the arena until only the loyal remained. The realization struck Étienne like a blow, but he had no time to dwell on it. Garon was charging again.

This time, Étienne met the brute's attack head-on. Their weapons clashed with a deafening clang, the impact jolting through Étienne's arms. Garon grinned, his strength driving Étienne back a step, but the swordsman twisted, using the brute's momentum against him. Garon stumbled, and Étienne's blade found a gap in his armor, slicing into his thigh. The big man bellowed in pain, falling to one knee.

The wiry man used the opening to lunge, his daggers aiming for Étienne's throat. Étienne spun, his sword catching one of the blades and forcing it aside. The other dagger nicked his arm, a shallow cut that sent a sharp sting racing up his side. Étienne retaliated with a swift riposte, his sword carving a deep line across the wiry man's chest. The mercenary staggered back, his eyes wide with shock as blood seeped through his tunic.

The crowd erupted as Étienne pressed his advantage. His movements were precise, efficient, each strike aimed to disarm or disable. He didn't relish the violence, but he fought with the cold determination of a man who had nothing to lose. Within moments, the wiry man collapsed to the ground, his daggers falling from his lifeless hands.

Étienne turned to Garon, who was struggling to rise despite his injuries. The brute's grin was gone, replaced by a snarl of defiance. Étienne leveled his sword at him.

"Yield," Étienne said, his voice steady.

Garon spat blood onto the dirt. "Not to you, traitor."

Étienne hesitated. He had no desire to kill the man, despite their history. But the rules of the tournament were clear, and the crowd was baying for blood. Étienne tightened his grip, his blade poised for the final blow.

"Enough," a voice rang out.

The referee raised his hand, signaling the end of the match. Étienne looked up, surprised to see a messenger approach the royal box. The King leaned forward, his lips moving as he

whispered something to an aide. Moments later, the messenger stepped forward, his voice carrying over the crowd.

“By royal decree, the victor is spared the duty of execution,” the messenger announced. “The match is decided.”

The crowd groaned in disappointment, but Étienne felt a surge of relief. He lowered his sword and stepped back as guards moved in to drag Garon and the other mercenary from the arena. Étienne knew the reprieve was temporary. The King’s motives were becoming clearer, and they were far from merciful.

As he left the arena, Étienne caught sight of Gabriel and Isolde watching from the edges of the crowd. Gabriel’s expression was grim, his arms crossed as he observed the matches with calculating eyes. Isolde, still masked and anonymous, nodded faintly in Étienne’s direction. They had all come to the tournament with their own goals, but the truths unfolding here were uniting them in ways none of them had expected.

Étienne returned to the competitors’ quarters, his mind racing. The King wasn’t just pitting warriors against each other—he was using the tournament as a weapon, weeding out the dissenters and the ambitious under the guise of sport. Étienne had survived this round, but the stakes were rising, and the cost of failure was growing sharper with every passing match.

He sat on the edge of his cot, staring at the blood-streaked blade resting across his knees. Redemption, he realized, would not come easily. But he had made his choice, and he would see it through. No matter the cost.

The crowd roared as Isolde stepped into the arena, her movements steady but her heart pounding. The match before her had been brutal, and the ground was still littered with the bloodied remnants of broken weapons and discarded helmets. She adjusted the simple mask covering the upper half of her face, its anonymity now more fragile than ever. The stakes had risen beyond victory—her life hung on every move she made.

Her opponent was none other than Count Merignac. Clad in ornate armor, he struck a theatrical figure as he saluted the royal box with exaggerated flair. His golden lion insignia gleamed in the sunlight, a symbol of his arrogance and power. He turned toward her, his expression masked by a cruel smile.

"Ah, the Phantom," he said, his voice carrying over the din of the crowd. "I’ve been waiting for this. Let us see if the tales of your skill are more than whispers in the dark."

Isolde gripped the hilt of her rapier tightly, forcing her voice to remain steady. “You’ll find I’m far more than a whisper, Count.”

The referee stepped back, signaling the start of the match. Merignac moved first, his blade slicing through the air in a broad, deliberate arc. Isolde dodged gracefully, her movements quick and precise, her smaller frame giving her the advantage. She struck back with a sharp riposte, her blade glancing off his shoulder armor.

The crowd erupted, their cheers and jeers blending into a cacophony. Isolde ignored them, focusing on the rhythm of the fight. Each clash of steel was a test, each feint and parry a

reminder of her training and her purpose. This wasn't just about defeating Merignac—it was about survival.

The Count's strikes grew more aggressive, his frustration evident as she evaded him time and again. "You're quick," he sneered, his tone laced with mockery. "But speed won't save you forever."

Isolde didn't reply. Instead, she feinted left, drawing him into an overcommitted lunge. She stepped to the side and delivered a precise thrust, her blade slicing across the unguarded section of his thigh. Merignac stumbled, cursing loudly as blood seeped through the gash. The crowd gasped, their excitement rising as the match tilted in her favor.

But as Isolde prepared her next move, a glint of steel caught her eye. A shadow moved in the stands, and her instincts screamed a warning. She ducked just as a throwing knife whistled past her head, embedding itself in the wooden post behind her.

The arena descended into chaos. Shouts erupted from the crowd as more figures emerged, masked and armed, their intentions clear. Assassins. Isolde's heart raced as she realized the Count's ploy. He hadn't come to fight her—he had come to kill her.

Merignac smiled, stepping back as two of the assassins descended into the arena. "Did you think I wouldn't recognize you, Lady Isolde?" he called, his voice dripping with malice. "Your little charade ends here."

Isolde barely had time to process his words before the assassins attacked. She parried the first strike, her blade clashing against the short sword of a masked assailant. The second assassin circled behind her, his dagger poised for a killing blow.

Before the strike could land, a blur of motion caught her eye. Gabriel d'Artois vaulted over the arena's barrier, his rapier flashing as he intercepted the assassin's blade. "You're late to the party," he said, his tone calm despite the chaos.

"Better late than never," Isolde replied, her voice breathless as she fought off her own opponent.

Étienne followed moments later, his sword cutting down a third assassin who had leapt into the fray. "I thought tournaments were supposed to be fair," he said, his tone dry. "This seems a little unorthodox."

"They're not exactly known for their honor," Isolde shot back, dodging another strike.

The three of them fought side by side, their blades a blur as they defended against the onslaught. The crowd was in a frenzy, some shouting for order while others cheered the spectacle. The royal guards hesitated, unsure whether to intervene or stand down. In the confusion, Isolde caught sight of the Duke of Laroque in the royal box, his expression unreadable but his eyes fixed on the melee.

Merignac, seeing his advantage slipping, signaled to his remaining men. "Kill them all!" he roared, retreating toward the edge of the arena.

Gabriel lunged after him, his blade slicing through another attacker's guard. "Go after him!" he shouted to Isolde. "We'll hold them off!"

Isolde hesitated, her instincts urging her to finish the Count here and now. But the arena was swarming with armed men, and the odds were stacked against them. Étienne grabbed her arm, his voice urgent. "We need to go. Now."

She nodded reluctantly, the fire in her chest warring with the need for survival. Together, the three of them fought their way toward the arena's edge, their movements synchronized despite the chaos. Gabriel parried a final strike before vaulting over the barrier, covering their retreat as they disappeared into the labyrinth of tents and alleys beyond the arena.

In the relative safety of a secluded grove, Isolde leaned against a tree, her breaths coming in sharp gasps. Her mask was gone, lost in the chaos, and her face was streaked with sweat and dirt. Gabriel and Étienne stood nearby, their weapons still drawn, their eyes scanning the shadows for any sign of pursuit.

"They know who I am," Isolde said finally, her voice filled with both anger and resignation. "There's no hiding now."

Gabriel sheathed his sword, his expression grim. "Then we don't hide. We plan."

Étienne crouched beside her, his tone steady. "We'll figure this out. The Count underestimated you once, and he won't get another chance."

Isolde met their eyes, her resolve hardening. "This isn't over. If they want a fight, they'll get one."

As the sound of distant shouts faded, the three of them prepared for what lay ahead. The tournament had been a stage for more than just combat—it had become a battlefield of survival, betrayal, and purpose. And though the stakes had risen, so had their determination.

Together, they would face whatever came next.

The room was dimly lit, the flickering light from a single lantern casting long shadows over piles of hastily gathered documents. Gabriel, Isolde, and Étienne crouched over the table, their faces tense as they sifted through the stolen correspondence. The Duke's private cache had been difficult to reach, but with the chaos of the attempted assassination in the arena, the trio had taken their chance. Now, they were uncovering more than they had bargained for.

Gabriel flipped through a stack of parchment, his sharp eyes scanning the flowing handwriting. "This isn't just about the tournament," he said, his voice low. "These letters—look at the names. Nobles, merchants, soldiers. The Duke has been buying loyalty across the realm."

"Buying loyalty isn't exactly new," Étienne said, leaning against the edge of the table. "That's how men like him operate. What makes this different?"

Gabriel set the parchment down, his jaw tightening. “It’s not just loyalty he’s buying. It’s power. These letters outline troop movements, supply chains, and covert deals. He’s building a private army, one large enough to challenge the King.”

Isolde picked up another letter, her brow furrowing as she read it. “Here,” she said, passing it to Gabriel. “This one mentions the King directly.”

Gabriel scanned the letter, his expression darkening. “He’s not just building an army. He’s doing it with the King’s blessing—or at least his knowledge. Look at this seal.” He pointed to the bottom of the parchment, where the royal crest was pressed into the wax.

Étienne straightened, his face a mixture of disbelief and anger. “You’re saying the King knows about this? That he’s letting the Duke arm himself?”

“It’s more than that,” Isolde said, her voice sharp. “The King isn’t just letting it happen. He’s complicit. These letters show coordinated efforts to destabilize certain regions—regions loyal to houses that oppose the Duke.”

Gabriel nodded grimly. “It’s a conspiracy, and it goes straight to the top. The Duke and the King aren’t rivals. They’re partners, working together to consolidate their power by eliminating dissenters.”

Étienne ran a hand through his hair, pacing the small room. “The tournament,” he muttered. “It was never about quelling tensions between the noble houses. It’s a smokescreen. A way to pit potential threats against each other while rooting out anyone who might resist their plans.”

“And we’ve been playing right into their hands,” Isolde said, her fists clenched. “Every duel, every victory—it’s all been part of their game.”

The weight of the revelation hung heavy in the room. Gabriel sat back, his eyes fixed on the documents in front of him. “This explains the assassins,” he said after a moment. “The Duke must have recognized you during your fight with Merignac. Once he realized who you were, he couldn’t risk letting you continue.”

Isolde’s jaw tightened. “He failed. And now we have this.” She gestured to the pile of letters. “This isn’t just proof of their conspiracy. It’s leverage.”

Étienne raised an eyebrow. “Leverage? Against the King and the Duke? That’s a death sentence.”

“Not if we use it wisely,” Gabriel interjected. “This information is dangerous, but it’s also our greatest weapon. If we can get it to the right people—nobles who haven’t been bought, leaders who still value justice—it could turn the tide.”

Isolde nodded, her determination growing. “We expose the truth, and we make sure the world knows what kind of men sit on the throne and behind it.”

Étienne crossed his arms, his skepticism evident. “And what happens when the King and the Duke find out we have this? They’ll send everything they have after us.”

Gabriel met his gaze, his voice calm but resolute. “They already will. The only difference now is that we have something worth fighting for.”

The trio fell silent, the enormity of their discovery settling over them. They had uncovered the rot at the heart of the kingdom, a conspiracy that reached into every corner of power. It wasn’t just about personal vendettas or individual wrongs anymore. This was a fight against the very system that had enabled men like the Duke and the King to rise unchecked.

Isolde broke the silence, her voice steady. “If we’re going to do this, we need a plan. A way to get this evidence into the right hands before they silence us for good.”

Gabriel nodded. “Agreed. But we need to be careful. This isn’t just about exposing the truth. It’s about surviving long enough to make it matter.”

Étienne sighed, the weight of the moment pressing down on him. “Well,” he said, his tone dry, “it’s not like I’ve ever been good at staying out of trouble.”

Isolde managed a faint smile, her eyes meeting his. “Then it’s settled.”

They gathered the documents, carefully bundling them into a satchel. As they prepared to leave, the distant sound of approaching footsteps reached their ears. Gabriel motioned for silence, his hand on his sword. The trio exchanged tense glances, their shared resolve unspoken but unshakable.

The fight ahead would be harder than any they had faced in the arena. But for the first time, they weren’t fighting alone—and they weren’t fighting blind.

Bonds of Steel

The abandoned mill on the outskirts of the forest offered little comfort, but it was quiet, secluded, and far from the eyes of those who sought them. Gabriel leaned against a crumbling beam, his arms crossed as he watched Isolde spread the stolen documents across a makeshift table. Étienne sat nearby, sharpening his blade in slow, deliberate strokes, the rhythmic sound filling the silence between them.

“We can’t stay here long,” Gabriel said, breaking the tension. “The Duke’s men will start combing the countryside soon, and they’ll have the King’s resources at their disposal.”

“I know,” Isolde replied, her focus on the papers. “But we need time to figure out our next move. We can’t act blindly.”

Étienne snorted, setting his blade down. “We already have a move: expose the letters, drag the King and the Duke into the light, and let the chips fall where they may.”

Gabriel shook his head, his expression grim. “It’s not that simple. These letters are damning, yes, but the nobles we’d be counting on to act are just as corrupt as the ones we’re fighting. Most of them are either bought or too afraid to speak out.”

“So, what?” Étienne shot back, his frustration evident. “We sit on this and wait for the Duke to put a knife in our backs? What’s the point of having leverage if we’re too scared to use it?”

Isolde straightened, her eyes flashing with defiance. “This isn’t about fear. It’s about strategy. If we rush in without a plan, we’ll lose everything—including our lives.”

Étienne pushed himself to his feet, his jaw tightening. “And what plan do you suggest? Waiting until they find us? Hoping they’ll politely step aside once we show them the truth? That’s not how men like the Duke or the King work.”

Gabriel stepped between them, his voice firm. “Enough. Fighting each other won’t get us anywhere.”

The tension crackled between the three of them, unspoken resentments and clashing ideals bubbling to the surface. Gabriel let out a slow breath, his tone softening. “I’ve spent my life watching men like the Duke rise to power. They thrive on division, on fear, on chaos. If we’re going to take them down, we need to trust each other.”

Étienne folded his arms, his glare shifting to Gabriel. “Trust? Easy for you to say. You’ve been playing this game for years. Some of us didn’t have the luxury of sitting in court, sipping wine and trading favors.”

Gabriel’s jaw tightened, but he didn’t take the bait. “And where did that get you, Étienne? Running with mercenaries, fighting other men’s battles for coin?”

The room fell silent, the weight of Gabriel’s words settling over them. Étienne’s hands clenched into fists, but he didn’t respond.

Isolde stepped forward, her voice cutting through the tension. “We all have blood on our hands, Gabriel. None of us came to this fight clean. But we’re here now, and we have a chance to do something that matters.”

Gabriel nodded slowly, his gaze softening as he met hers. “You’re right. This fight is bigger than any of us. If we don’t stand together, it’s already lost.”

Étienne sighed, running a hand through his hair. “Fine. I’m in. But if we’re going to do this, we do it my way—direct and fast. I’m not waiting for the nobles to grow a spine.”

“And I’m not risking everything on brute force,” Isolde countered, her voice steady. “We’ll be calculated, precise. Every move we make has to count.”

Gabriel raised a hand, cutting off the brewing argument. “We’ll do both. Strike where it hurts, but make sure the world is watching when we do. This isn’t just about exposing the Duke and the King—it’s about showing the people that they have power, too.”

The three of them exchanged reluctant nods, the beginnings of an uneasy truce forming. Gabriel stepped back, his voice resolute. “From this point forward, we’re not just individuals fighting for survival. We’re a unit. Every decision we make, we make together.”

Isolde extended her hand, her eyes locking with Gabriel’s. “Agreed.”

Étienne hesitated for a moment, then stepped forward, his calloused hand gripping theirs. “Agreed.”

As the three clasped hands, a faint sense of unity settled over them. It was tenuous, fragile, but it was enough to light a spark in the darkness.

Gabriel broke the silence, his tone pragmatic. “Our first priority is finding allies—people who can help spread the truth without leading it back to us.”

“I know someone,” Isolde said, her voice thoughtful. “A merchant in the city who deals in information. He’s loyal to no one but himself, but if we pay him, he’ll ensure these letters reach the right ears.”

Gabriel nodded. “Good. Then we move at dawn. Gather what you need and be ready.”

Étienne smiled, his grip tightening on his blade. “Looks like we’re back to running. Just how I like it.”

Isolde allowed herself a small smile, though her expression remained serious. The pact they had formed was a fragile thing, held together by necessity and a shared goal. But for the first time, she felt the weight of her mission lessen, if only slightly. She wasn’t alone in this fight anymore.

As the lantern flickered, their shadows danced across the walls—three figures bound together by steel and purpose. The road ahead was uncertain, but they had taken the first step. Together, they would challenge the forces that sought to crush them.

And together, they might just have a chance.

The informant’s hideout was buried deep within the twisting alleys of the city’s underbelly, a labyrinth of shadowed corners and narrow passages that seemed to close in with every step. Gabriel led the way, his movements careful and precise, his hand never straying far from the hilt of his rapier. Behind him, Isolde and Étienne followed in silence, their eyes darting to every shadow, every fleeting movement in the gloom.

“This man we’re meeting,” Étienne said quietly, breaking the tense silence, “you trust him?”

“No,” Gabriel replied without turning. “But I trust his greed.”

“That’s comforting,” Étienne muttered under his breath, earning a faint smirk from Isolde.

The informant, a man named Jacques, was known for selling secrets to the highest bidder. His loyalty belonged only to coin, but that made him predictable—a quality Gabriel valued in moments like this. According to the whispers in the streets, Jacques had recently acquired

documents that could link the King to a series of covert operations against dissenting nobles. If the trio could secure those papers, they would have the leverage they needed to expose the full scope of the conspiracy.

Gabriel stopped in front of a decrepit building, its windows dark and boarded up, its door hanging slightly ajar. He glanced back at Isolde and Étienne. “Stay sharp. This place stinks of betrayal.”

“Doesn’t everywhere we go?” Étienne quipped, drawing his sword.

Gabriel ignored him, pushing the door open cautiously. The inside was dimly lit by a single candle on a rickety table, where a wiry man with a crooked grin sat waiting. Jacques. His sharp eyes flicked over the three of them as they entered, lingering a moment too long on the weapons at their sides.

“You came,” Jacques said, his voice oily. “I wasn’t sure you’d make it through the alleys without losing your purses—or your throats.”

Gabriel stepped forward, keeping a careful distance. “We’re here for the documents. Do you have them?”

Jacques leaned back in his chair, his grin widening. “Oh, I have them. But they weren’t easy to get, you know. Lots of dangerous people don’t want these seeing the light of day.”

“That’s why we’re here,” Isolde said, her tone sharp. “Name your price.”

Jacques tapped a finger against his lips, his grin fading as his eyes grew calculating. “Twenty gold pieces. And no haggling.”

Étienne scoffed. “Twenty? For some papers? You must think we’re desperate.”

Jacques leaned forward, his gaze locking onto Étienne’s. “You are desperate. Otherwise, you wouldn’t be here.”

Gabriel held up a hand, silencing Étienne before the conversation could escalate. He reached into his coat and produced a small pouch, tossing it onto the table. “Twenty pieces. Now hand them over.”

Jacques picked up the pouch, his fingers moving with practiced speed as he counted the coins. Satisfied, he reached beneath the table and pulled out a bundle of parchment wrapped in oilskin. “As promised,” he said, sliding it across the table. “And just so you know, if anyone asks, I’ve never seen you.”

Gabriel snatched the bundle, tucking it securely into his coat. “If anyone asks, you’d better stick to that story.”

The trio turned to leave, but as they reached the door, a sudden noise stopped them in their tracks—the sound of boots on stone, too many to be a coincidence. Gabriel’s hand shot to his rapier, his instincts screaming a warning.

“Friends of yours?” Étienne asked, his voice low but edged with tension.

Jacques paled, glancing toward the door as the sound grew louder. “I didn’t say anything, I swear—”

The door burst open, and royal guards flooded the room, their armor gleaming in the dim light. Their captain stepped forward, his sword drawn, his expression cold and resolute. “By order of the King, you are all under arrest.”

Gabriel reacted first, his rapier flashing as he deflected the captain’s strike. “Move!” he barked, shoving Isolde and Étienne toward the back of the room. The trio ducked into a narrow hallway as the guards surged forward, their shouts filling the air.

Étienne slammed a heavy barrel into the path of their pursuers, buying them a few precious seconds. “I thought this Jacques was predictable!” he shouted as they sprinted down the passage.

“He is,” Gabriel replied, his breath labored. “Which means someone else tipped them off.”

Isolde skidded to a stop as they reached a dead end, a single window their only escape. “We’re out of options,” she said, glancing at the approaching guards.

“Not yet,” Gabriel said. He smashed the window with the hilt of his sword and climbed through, landing on a slanted rooftop outside. Isolde followed, her movements quick and sure, while Étienne brought up the rear, pausing only to hurl a broken plank into the guards’ faces as they reached the window.

The trio scrambled across the rooftops, their boots slipping on the uneven tiles. Below, the streets teemed with more guards, their torches casting an ominous glow over the city. The papers tucked inside Gabriel’s coat felt heavier with every step, a reminder of the risk they carried.

As they reached the edge of the rooftops, Étienne spotted a rope bridge stretching between two buildings. “There!” he called, leading the way.

The trio crossed the swaying bridge, its old ropes creaking under their weight. Gabriel glanced back, his eyes narrowing as the guards began to follow. He severed the ropes with a single slash of his rapier, sending the bridge—and their pursuers—crashing to the ground below.

Breathless and battered, the trio descended into the alleys on the far side of the district, melting into the shadows. They didn’t stop running until the glow of the city faded behind them, replaced by the quiet rustle of the forest.

Finally, Gabriel slowed, leaning against a tree as he caught his breath. Isolde and Étienne joined him, their faces etched with exhaustion and relief.

“Did we get it?” Isolde asked, her voice strained.

Gabriel pulled the bundle of documents from his coat, holding it up. “We got it.”

Étienne grinned despite himself. “Worth every coin.”

Isolde’s expression darkened. “They’ll come after us even harder now. The King knows we’re getting close.”

Gabriel nodded, his gaze steely. “Let them come. The closer we get, the more desperate they’ll become. And desperation makes men dangerous—but also careless.”

As the trio caught their breath, the enormity of what they had just secured began to sink in. The papers were more than evidence—they were a weapon, one that could turn the tide in their fight against the King and the Duke.

But the road ahead was long, and the shadows were closing in.

The fire crackled softly, its warmth a fragile shield against the chill of the forest night. Isolde sat a few feet away from the flickering flames, sharpening her blade with slow, deliberate strokes. Étienne, perched on a fallen log nearby, watched her with an intensity that he hadn’t yet dared to voice. Gabriel sat apart from them both, his silhouette barely visible as he stared into the darkness, his thoughts heavy and unspoken.

The silence between them was companionable at first, but tension lingered beneath the surface. They had survived the ambush, but the cost of their mission—and the odds against them—were becoming increasingly clear.

“You’ve been quiet tonight,” Étienne said, breaking the stillness as he looked at Isolde.

She glanced up briefly, her sharp eyes reflecting the firelight. “Not much to say.”

“Funny,” Étienne said, a faint grin tugging at his lips. “I’d have thought saving the realm from corruption would inspire a stirring speech or two.”

Isolde smiled despite herself, the corners of her mouth curving just slightly. “And I’d have thought a sellsword like you would prefer silence over stirring speeches.”

Étienne laughed softly, leaning back on his hands. “Fair enough. But silence isn’t as interesting as you are.”

Her hands faltered on the whetstone, the rhythm of her sharpening momentarily disrupted. She looked at him, her expression guarded. “Is that supposed to be a compliment?”

Étienne shrugged, his grin widening. “Take it how you want. Just saying what’s true.”

Isolde didn’t reply immediately, returning her attention to her blade. Her expression softened, though, a flicker of something unspoken passing between them.

“You don’t need to charm me, Étienne,” she said finally, her voice quieter. “This isn’t a game.”

“I’m not trying to,” Étienne said, his tone serious now. “I just... I don’t know. I don’t meet many people like you.”

Isolde set her blade aside, meeting his gaze fully. “People like me?”

“People who care,” he said simply. “About more than surviving.”

She held his gaze, her guarded exterior slipping just slightly. “It’s not that simple. Caring about something doesn’t always mean you’ll win.”

Étienne nodded, his grin fading. “Maybe not. But it’s worth trying.”

The quiet between them stretched again, this time heavier with the weight of their shared burdens. Isolde looked away, her thoughts visibly turning inward.

Across the clearing, Gabriel shifted, his voice cutting through the stillness. “Trying isn’t enough.”

Both Isolde and Étienne turned toward him. Gabriel’s face was shadowed, but his voice carried a sharp edge. “You can try as much as you like, but it doesn’t change the odds. We’re outnumbered, outmatched, and every move we make puts a target on our backs.”

“You don’t think we can do this,” Isolde said, her tone not accusatory, but probing.

Gabriel sighed, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees. “I think we’ve uncovered something bigger than any of us realized. And I think the people we’re up against didn’t rise to power by making mistakes.”

Étienne stood, pacing toward the edge of the firelight. “So what? We give up? Run and hide while the King and the Duke tighten their grip on the realm?”

Gabriel didn’t answer immediately. When he finally spoke, his voice was quieter, tinged with regret. “I’ve seen what happens when you stand against men like them. I’ve seen good people crushed because they believed the truth was enough.”

“And yet you’re here,” Isolde said, her eyes narrowing. “You didn’t have to come with us, but you did. Why?”

Gabriel’s jaw tightened, his gaze dropping to the ground. “Because I owe it to someone I failed.”

The weight of his words silenced them. Étienne stopped pacing, turning to face Gabriel fully. “Philippe,” he said softly, understanding dawning in his expression.

Gabriel nodded, his hands clenching into fists. “I trained him, watched him grow into someone who believed the world could be better. And I let him die because I didn’t see the danger in time.”

Isolde rose, stepping closer to Gabriel. Her voice softened, losing its usual sharpness. “Gabriel, you didn’t fail him. The Duke set him up. He never had a chance.”

Gabriel’s head lifted, his eyes meeting hers. “And now neither do we.”

“Don’t say that,” Isolde said, her tone fierce. “We’re not dead yet. And as long as we’re still breathing, we have a chance.”

Étienne stepped beside her, crossing his arms. “She’s right. You’ve seen how the Duke operates. He’s arrogant. Men like him think they’re untouchable until someone proves them wrong.”

Gabriel looked between the two of them, their resolve evident despite the weight of their task. He let out a slow breath, nodding reluctantly. “You’re both more stubborn than I expected.”

“It’s what keeps us alive,” Étienne said with a grin.

Gabriel’s lips twitched in the faintest hint of a smile. “Maybe it’ll be enough.”

As the fire crackled between them, the tension began to ease, replaced by a tentative sense of unity. Étienne returned to his seat, casting a sidelong glance at Isolde.

“You know,” he said, his tone lighter, “if Gabriel here can manage to believe in this mission, maybe there’s hope for the rest of us.”

Isolde shook her head, but there was a faint smile on her lips. “Don’t push your luck.”

Étienne chuckled, but his smile lingered as the three of them settled into a fragile truce. Their mission was fraught with danger and uncertainty, but for the first time, it felt as though they might actually have a chance—not because of their individual skills, but because they had each other.

As the fire burned lower, the night deepened, wrapping them in its quiet promise of possibility.

The royal gala shimmered with opulence, the grand ballroom alive with light and motion. Crystal chandeliers cast their glow over polished marble floors, while nobles adorned in silks and jewels glided across the space, their laughter and murmurs filling the air. Musicians played a lively tune in the corner, their strings and horns weaving a melody that masked the darker undertones of the night.

Gabriel adjusted the cuff of his borrowed doublet, his sharp eyes scanning the crowd. The disguise he wore—a somber yet elegant ensemble fit for a lesser noble—had cost them a small fortune, but it was their key to blending in. Étienne, far less comfortable in his tailored attire, tugged at his collar, muttering under his breath about the absurdity of pretending to be one of the people he despised.

Isolde, however, moved with practiced ease. Draped in a crimson gown that hinted at her infamous sash, her hair swept into an elaborate style, she drew the eyes of everyone she passed. Her mask—golden with delicate filigree—hid her identity, but her presence commanded attention. She had insisted on walking in first, knowing that distraction was their greatest ally tonight.

“Do you have eyes on him?” Gabriel murmured, his voice barely audible as he leaned toward Isolde.

“Not yet,” she replied, her gaze sweeping the room. “The spymaster won’t show himself until he’s certain the night is secure. Men like him prefer to watch from the shadows.”

Étienne, standing slightly behind them, scanned the crowd as well. “And what makes us think he’ll reveal himself at all?”

“Because this gala is his domain,” Gabriel replied. “Every whisper, every glance—it all reaches him. And if he suspects anyone here is a threat, he’ll come to see for himself.”

As if on cue, a ripple of attention spread through the room. The King’s spymaster, a man known only as **Armand**, emerged from a shadowed alcove near the far end of the ballroom. Clad in dark, understated finery, his mask was a simple black piece that only partially concealed his hawkish features. He moved with calculated precision, speaking in hushed tones to a pair of courtiers before disappearing again into the crowd.

“There,” Isolde whispered, her posture tightening. “That’s him.”

Gabriel nodded. “Stay close. He’ll be watching for anything out of place.”

The group split, each moving to a different part of the ballroom to avoid suspicion. Isolde made her way toward the spymaster, her movements deliberate as she weaved through the crowd. A nobleman attempted to engage her in conversation, but she brushed him off with a polite smile, her eyes never leaving Armand.

Gabriel circled the room, keeping to the edges where the shadows were deepest. His gaze remained fixed on the spymaster, watching for patterns in his movements, subtle cues that revealed his priorities. Étienne, meanwhile, lingered near the banquet tables, his fingers brushing the hilt of the concealed dagger beneath his coat. He hated this kind of game, but he understood its necessity. Tonight, brute force wasn’t an option.

As the music shifted to a slower tune, Armand moved toward the balcony, his posture relaxed but his movements cautious. Isolde followed, her steps light, her expression unreadable beneath the mask. Gabriel and Étienne exchanged a glance from across the room before making their way closer.

Armand paused near the edge of the balcony, gazing out at the gardens below. His voice, calm and measured, broke the silence. “You’ve been watching me.”

Isolde froze, her heart skipping a beat. She hadn’t expected him to address her so directly. Schooling her features, she stepped forward, allowing the moonlight to catch the gilded edges of her mask. “Should I not admire the man everyone whispers about?”

Armand turned, his sharp eyes narrowing as they swept over her. “Admiration can be dangerous in a place like this. And you, my lady, are far too bold to be here by accident.”

Isolde felt the weight of his scrutiny, but she held her ground. “Perhaps I enjoy taking risks.”

Armand’s lips twitched into a faint smirk. “Indeed. But tell me—who are you really? No mask can hide intent, and yours is written in every step you take.”

Before she could respond, Gabriel appeared at her side, his tone smooth and disarming. “Forgive her, my lord. My companion has a tendency to wander.”

Armand’s eyes flicked to Gabriel, his expression unreadable. “And you are?”

“A traveler,” Gabriel replied. “Drawn here by the promise of good wine and better company.”

Étienne emerged from the crowd, his presence a calculated addition to the exchange. “Though I must say, the company has been more interesting than the wine.”

Armand’s gaze shifted between them, the tension in the air thickening. “Three travelers, all with the same inclination to linger near me. Unusual.”

Gabriel stepped forward slightly, his voice lowering. “We’re here because we need answers. You can provide them.”

Armand’s smile vanished, his posture growing rigid. “And if I choose not to?”

Étienne’s hand rested casually on the hilt of his dagger, his tone deceptively light. “Then we’ll have to find someone else. But I’m guessing you wouldn’t want that.”

Armand studied them for a long moment, his sharp mind piecing together their intentions. Finally, he nodded toward a narrow door near the balcony. “Follow me. Quietly.”

The room Armand led them to was small and sparsely furnished, its walls lined with shelves of ledgers and scrolls. He closed the door behind them, his demeanor shifting to one of cautious authority.

“You’ve risked much to corner me,” he said, turning to face them. “Speak quickly.”

Gabriel stepped forward, his tone firm. “We know about the letters, the assassinations, and the King’s hand in all of it. You’ve orchestrated much of this.”

Armand’s eyes flickered, but he didn’t deny it. “And if I have? What do you hope to gain from confronting me?”

“Leverage,” Isolde said sharply. “You’re the one holding this conspiracy together. If we take you down, the rest will fall.”

Armand chuckled softly, shaking his head. “You think me a lynchpin? Foolish. Men like me are tools, nothing more. Remove one, and another takes its place.”

Étienne stepped closer, his voice laced with threat. “Then why don’t we test that theory?”

Gabriel raised a hand, stopping Étienne before he could go further. “We’re not here to kill you. We’re here to make a deal.”

Armand raised an eyebrow, intrigued. “A deal?”

“Your knowledge,” Gabriel said. “Your connections. We can expose the Duke and the King, but only if we know where to strike. Help us, and we can offer you protection.”

Armand laughed, a bitter sound. “Protection? From the King? You overestimate your reach.”

“Perhaps,” Isolde said, her voice cold. “But it’s a better offer than what you’ll get if you refuse.”

The spymaster hesitated, his calculating mind weighing their words. Finally, he stepped toward the desk, pulling a small ledger from the shelf. “This contains names, dates, payments—the framework of their schemes. Take it.”

Gabriel accepted the ledger, his expression grim. “Why help us?”

Armand met his gaze, his smile faint but genuine. “Because you’re not the only one tired of being a tool.”

Before they could respond, the sound of footsteps echoed in the hall. Armand’s eyes widened. “Guards. You need to leave.”

With no time to argue, the trio slipped out through a hidden passage Armand revealed behind a shelf. As they disappeared into the night, the spymaster turned back to face the door, his expression calm but resolute.

The gala would go on without them, but the pieces had begun to move. The war was just beginning.

The hidden passage led the trio deeper into the bowels of the palace, winding through a labyrinth of dimly lit tunnels and narrow staircases. Gabriel carried the spymaster’s ledger tucked securely beneath his coat, his grip tight as if it might vanish if he let go. The echoes of distant footsteps followed them, growing louder with every turn.

“We’re not alone,” Étienne said, his voice low but urgent.

Isolde glanced back, her crimson gown now streaked with dirt and grime. “The guards must have found Armand. We need to move faster.”

Gabriel’s jaw clenched. “If they catch us with this ledger, everything we’ve fought for is lost.”

They rounded a corner and found themselves in a cavernous chamber, its walls lined with old stone and iron sconces holding flickering torches. The sound of boots echoed louder now, closing in. Étienne drew his sword, his eyes scanning the shadows.

“They’re cutting us off,” he muttered.

The door they had entered through burst open, and royal guards poured into the chamber, their blades glinting in the dim light. At the center of the formation was **Armand**, blood trickling from a wound on his temple, his face pale but resolute. His captors had dragged him along, and his expression betrayed the knowledge that his time was running out.

One of the guards stepped forward, his voice sharp. “Surrender now, or you’ll leave this place in pieces.”

Étienne raised his blade, his smirk tinged with defiance. “Funny. I was about to say the same to you.”

Gabriel stepped into position beside him, drawing his rapier with a fluid motion. Isolde unsheathed her weapon as well, her eyes flicking toward the guards but lingering on Armand. His sharp gaze met hers, and in that brief moment, an unspoken understanding passed between them.

“Hold the line!” Gabriel barked, his voice commanding as the guards surged forward.

The chamber erupted into chaos. Steel clashed against steel, sparks flying with each collision. Étienne fought with the ferocity of a man who had nothing left to lose, his movements swift and brutal. He disarmed one guard with a precise strike to the wrist and pivoted to block another attack, his blade a blur of motion.

Isolde’s movements were measured and deliberate, each strike calculated to disable rather than kill. She dodged a heavy swing from a halberd, her smaller frame giving her the agility to weave through the guards’ attacks. She struck low, sweeping the legs out from under one attacker before parrying another’s blade with a sharp twist of her wrist.

Gabriel held the center, his rapier moving with the precision of a master. His strikes were quick, his parries seamless, but his eyes were constantly scanning the room. He spotted Armand, still held by two guards, his body sagging but his expression defiant.

“Armand!” Gabriel shouted. “The ledger—it can’t fall into their hands!”

The spymaster, despite his injuries, straightened. “Then it’s time for sacrifices.”

Before Gabriel could react, Armand twisted sharply, wrenching free from the guards who held him. With one final burst of energy, he grabbed a torch from the wall and thrust it into the pile of dry parchment and scrolls that littered the chamber’s center.

Flames roared to life, spreading rapidly as the guards shouted in alarm. The smoke thickened almost instantly, obscuring vision and throwing the room into chaos.

“No!” Isolde cried, realizing what Armand had done. The ledger—their proof, their leverage—was engulfed in flames along with the rest of the documents.

Étienne fought his way toward Gabriel, his face grim. “We need to move. Now.”

Gabriel hesitated, his gaze fixed on Armand. The spymaster staggered, a sword buried in his side, but his face was calm, almost serene. He turned toward Gabriel, his voice hoarse but steady.

“Finish what I couldn’t,” he said before collapsing to the ground, his life ebbing away as the flames consumed everything around him.

The guards regrouped, their cries muffled by the roar of the fire. Gabriel grabbed Isolde's arm, pulling her toward the far side of the chamber. "We can't stay! Go!"

The trio fought their way through the chaos, dodging the guards who were now more focused on containing the blaze than pursuing them. The smoke burned their lungs, the heat searing their skin, but they pressed on, driven by sheer will.

They emerged into the cool night air, gasping for breath as they stumbled into the palace gardens. Étienne leaned heavily against a stone fountain, his blade still drawn, while Isolde clutched her side where a shallow cut bled through her gown. Gabriel stood apart, his shoulders slumped as he stared back at the glowing inferno that consumed the chamber they had just escaped.

"It's gone," Isolde said, her voice raw. "Everything we needed—it's all gone."

Gabriel turned, his face a mask of anger and grief. "Not everything. Armand's sacrifice wasn't meaningless. He gave us more than just documents—he gave us time."

Étienne sheathed his sword, his expression dark. "Time for what? The King and the Duke will tighten their grip now. We're back where we started."

"No," Gabriel said firmly. "We know their tactics, their connections. And we know they fear exposure. That's a weapon in itself."

Isolde wiped the blood from her side, her jaw tightening as her resolve returned. "Then we use what we have. We've lost the ledger, but we haven't lost the fight."

Gabriel nodded, his gaze hardening. "Armand believed we could finish this. We owe it to him to try."

As the flames lit the night sky behind them, the trio gathered their strength. The road ahead was more treacherous than ever, but they weren't finished. They couldn't be.

The fight was not over.

The Shadow Duel

The letter arrived at dawn, delivered by a courier who disappeared into the early morning mist before anyone could question him. Gabriel found it lying on the stone table in the abandoned courtyard they had chosen as their temporary hideout. The wax seal, embossed with the crest of the royal guard, brought a surge of memories he had tried to bury for years.

Étienne peered over Gabriel's shoulder as he broke the seal, his curiosity evident. "What does it say?"

Gabriel's jaw tightened as his eyes scanned the letter. The words were sharp and precise, like the blade of the man who had written them.

To Gabriel d'Artois,

It seems even shadows cannot hide you forever. I have long waited to cross blades with you again, and now the opportunity has presented itself. Meet me at the midnight hour, in the abandoned arena near the royal gardens. Let us settle what was left unfinished.

– L. Montclair

Étienne raised an eyebrow. "Montclair? That name sounds familiar."

"It should," Gabriel said, his voice low. "He's the King's personal swordsman—and my former rival."

"Rival?" Isolde asked, stepping into the courtyard. She glanced at the letter in Gabriel's hands, her brow furrowing. "And he wants a duel?"

Gabriel nodded, folding the letter carefully. "Laurent Montclair and I trained together years ago. He was ambitious, talented, and ruthless—everything the King wanted in a blade. When I left the court, he stayed behind, climbing higher and cementing his loyalty to the crown."

Étienne leaned against the table, his arms crossed. "And now he's calling you out. Why?"

"Because he's clever," Gabriel said. "A duel with me serves two purposes: it satisfies his pride, and it ensures I'm no longer a threat to the King."

Isolde's eyes narrowed. "Then why even consider it? If it's a trap, we should avoid it."

"It's not just a trap," Gabriel said, his voice calm but resolute. "It's an opportunity."

Étienne frowned. "An opportunity to get yourself killed?"

"No," Gabriel said. "An opportunity to get closer to the palace. If Montclair is acting on the King's orders, then this duel will be carefully monitored. The guards will be watching, the court will be whispering. And if I play this right, I can use it to gather information."

Isolde crossed her arms, her expression skeptical. "And what happens if you lose?"

Gabriel met her gaze, his tone unyielding. "Then I die. But if I refuse, we lose any chance of infiltrating the palace."

Étienne exhaled sharply, shaking his head. "You're insane, you know that? But I've seen you fight. If anyone can handle this, it's you."

Isolde remained silent for a moment, her eyes searching Gabriel's face. Finally, she nodded reluctantly. "Fine. But if we're doing this, we do it smart. We'll find a way to cover you from the shadows."

Gabriel's lips twitched in a faint smile. "I'd expect nothing less."

As the midnight hour approached, the trio made their way to the abandoned arena, its crumbling stone walls illuminated by the pale glow of the moon. The air was heavy with tension, every shadow seeming to hold a threat. Gabriel walked ahead, his rapier hanging loosely at his side, his posture calm but alert.

Étienne and Isolde lingered near the edge of the arena, hidden among the ruins. Étienne held a bow, its string taut, while Isolde gripped a dagger, her eyes scanning the perimeter for any signs of ambush.

Laurent Montclair stood at the center of the arena, his polished armor gleaming like a predator's hide. His sword, long and elegant, caught the moonlight as he raised it in a mock salute. His face was partially obscured by a simple mask, but Gabriel recognized the cold confidence in his stance.

"You came," Montclair said, his voice smooth and laced with amusement. "I half-expected you to slink away, as you did all those years ago."

Gabriel stepped into the ring, his rapier steady in his hand. "I didn't slink away, Laurent. I walked away from something I couldn't stomach. It seems you stayed and made it your feast."

Montclair chuckled, his blade cutting a small arc in the air. "You always had a flair for dramatics. Let's see if your blade is as sharp as your tongue."

The two men circled each other, the tension palpable. Montclair struck first, his sword slicing through the air with practiced precision. Gabriel parried smoothly, the clash of steel ringing out like a bell in the still night.

The duel was a dance, each movement deliberate and deadly. Montclair fought with the confidence of a man who had honed his craft in countless battles, his strikes precise and relentless. Gabriel matched him, his movements fluid and measured, his mind focused on every detail.

From her perch, Isolde watched with clenched fists. "He's good," she whispered, her voice tinged with worry.

Étienne, his bow ready but his expression calm, nodded. "So is Gabriel. Just watch."

Montclair's strikes grew faster, more aggressive, but Gabriel held his ground. He dodged a lunge and countered with a riposte, his blade grazing Montclair's shoulder. The younger man grinned, his eyes flashing with exhilaration.

"You've improved," Montclair said, his voice almost admiring. "But so have I."

He feinted left, then struck low, his blade skimming Gabriel's side. The older swordsman hissed in pain but didn't falter, stepping back to regain his footing.

"You'll have to do better than that," Gabriel said, his tone cold.

Their blades clashed again, sparks flying as they pressed closer. Gabriel's mind raced, analyzing Montclair's patterns, searching for an opening. This wasn't just a duel—it was a test, a game of wits as much as skill.

As the fight wore on, Gabriel began to sense Montclair's impatience. The younger man's strikes became more forceful, his frustration evident. Gabriel seized the moment, sidestepping a heavy swing and delivering a quick slash to Montclair's arm. Blood splattered the ground, and Montclair stumbled back, his grin faltering.

Before either could strike again, a sharp whistle cut through the air. Gabriel froze, his instincts flaring. From the shadows, figures emerged—guards, their swords drawn, their expressions grim.

"It seems the King has decided this duel isn't worth the risk," Montclair said, his voice tinged with disappointment.

Gabriel tightened his grip on his rapier, his eyes darting toward the approaching guards. "Then let's make sure it wasn't for nothing."

The air in the arena was thick with tension as Gabriel and Laurent Montclair squared off again, their blades gleaming in the moonlight. Blood trickled from Gabriel's side where Montclair's blade had found purchase earlier, but he held his ground, his grip firm on his rapier. Across from him, Montclair smiled faintly, his wounded arm hanging at his side but his confidence unshaken.

"This feels familiar, doesn't it?" Montclair said, his voice carrying a mix of mockery and nostalgia. "The master and the pupil. Only this time, the pupil surpasses the teacher."

Gabriel didn't rise to the bait. He steadied his breathing, blocking out the sting of his injuries and the noise in his mind. "You were always eager to claim victory before it was earned."

Montclair's smile sharpened, and he lunged, his blade slicing through the air with deadly precision. Gabriel sidestepped, parrying with a quick movement of his wrist, the clash of steel echoing through the ruined arena. Each strike was more than an attack—it was a question, a challenge to the other's resolve and skill.

Montclair fought with a ferocity that was almost beautiful, his movements graceful and deliberate. Gabriel countered with the experience of a man who had lived through more battles than he cared to remember. He read Montclair's patterns, his feints, the slight hesitations that betrayed his next move. But it was clear the younger man had grown since they had last crossed blades.

"You've slowed," Montclair said, his blade cutting a shallow line across Gabriel's shoulder. "The years have dulled you, Gabriel."

Gabriel ignored the pain, his voice steady. "The years taught me patience. Something you still lack."

He struck back, his rapier finding a gap in Montclair's defenses. The blade grazed his opponent's ribs, drawing a sharp gasp of pain. Montclair's expression darkened, his smile replaced by a grim determination.

The duel shifted, the rhythm growing faster, more brutal. Each clash of steel carried the weight of their history, their choices, and their failures. Gabriel felt the memories pressing down on him: Philippe, his bright-eyed pupil, lying dead in a pool of blood. The lives he had taken, the lives he had failed to save. Every strike Montclair landed seemed to echo with the voices of the past.

"You've been running your whole life," Montclair said, his voice breathless but unrelenting. "Running from responsibility, from failure. Tell me, Gabriel, how many more will you fail before this is over?"

Gabriel's grip tightened on his rapier, his anger flaring. "And you've spent your life chasing power, Montclair. Tell me, what have you sacrificed to serve a king who will never see you as more than a pawn?"

Their blades met again, the force of the impact sending vibrations up Gabriel's arm. He staggered, his body screaming in protest, but he refused to fall. Not here. Not now.

Montclair seized the moment, pressing the attack with a flurry of strikes that left Gabriel on the defensive. The older swordsman parried each blow, his movements growing slower, more deliberate. He was waiting, searching for the opening he knew would come.

And then it did. Montclair overextended, his blade dipping too far to the right. Gabriel stepped inside the swing, twisting his wrist to send Montclair's sword spinning from his grasp. In one fluid motion, Gabriel brought his rapier to Montclair's throat, the tip pressing against his skin.

The younger man froze, his chest heaving, his eyes wide with disbelief. The crowd of guards that had begun to close in stopped, their weapons poised but their expressions uncertain.

"It's over," Gabriel said, his voice quiet but firm. "Yield."

Montclair's lips curled into a bitter smile. "You think this is victory? You think the King will let you walk away from this?"

Gabriel's gaze didn't waver. "I'm not asking the King for permission."

For a moment, it seemed Montclair might resist, but then his shoulders slumped, his breath escaping in a sharp exhale. "Do what you will. But this changes nothing."

Gabriel lowered his rapier, the weight of the fight catching up to him as he stepped back. He felt the warm, wet trickle of blood seeping from his side, his legs trembling beneath him. The adrenaline that had fueled him was fading, replaced by a bone-deep exhaustion.

Montclair sank to his knees, clutching his wounded ribs as he watched Gabriel. "You're a fool, d'Artois. A tired, broken fool."

“Maybe,” Gabriel said, his voice hollow. “But even fools can fight for something.”

The guards began to stir, their hesitation giving way to movement as they closed in once more. Étienne’s voice cut through the tension, sharp and urgent. “Gabriel! Move!”

Gabriel turned toward the edge of the arena, where Étienne and Isolde were waiting, their weapons drawn. He stumbled toward them, his vision blurring as the pain in his side worsened. Étienne grabbed him as he reached the steps, slinging Gabriel’s arm over his shoulder to support him.

“Thought you’d last a little longer,” Étienne said, his voice light but edged with worry.

“Your faith is touching,” Gabriel muttered, his breath labored.

Isolde pressed a hand to Gabriel’s shoulder, her eyes scanning his wounds. “We need to get out of here now.”

The guards surged forward, their commander shouting orders. Étienne and Isolde fought them off, their movements quick and precise as they carved a path toward the exit. Gabriel, too weak to fight, could only follow, each step a battle of its own.

As they disappeared into the night, Gabriel glanced back at the arena, the memories of the duel still fresh in his mind. He had won, but the victory felt hollow. Montclair’s words lingered, a reminder of the past he could never fully escape.

“You’re a fool, d’Artois.”

Maybe Montclair was right. But fools, Gabriel thought, could still make a difference.

The palace loomed ahead, its spires piercing the night sky like darkened blades. Lit windows glimmered against the inky blackness, a facade of opulence masking the rot that lay within. Étienne crouched in the shadows of a nearby grove, his eyes fixed on the towering structure as he adjusted the straps of his leather gauntlets. Beside him, Isolde knelt, her crimson sash replaced with a muted cloak to avoid drawing attention.

“Remind me why we’re doing this again,” Étienne whispered, his tone tinged with annoyance. “I thought we were supposed to be recovering, not storming the lion’s den.”

“Gabriel’s not storming anything,” Isolde replied, her voice calm but firm. “He’s barely breathing. If we wait for him to recover, we’ll lose the momentum we gained from the duel.”

Étienne sighed, running a hand through his hair. “Fine. But if this goes south, I’m blaming you.”

“Noted,” Isolde said dryly, her focus returning to the palace. “The spymaster’s ledger may be gone, but the King’s web of secrets is far too large to hide everything in one place. The records room inside the palace holds more than enough to expose him.”

Étienne adjusted the blade strapped to his belt, shaking his head. “You make it sound so easy. Walk in, grab the evidence, stroll out. What could possibly go wrong?”

Isolde ignored his sarcasm, her sharp eyes scanning the patrolling guards. “The guards change shifts every hour. We have a window—small, but manageable. Follow me, and stay quiet.”

The pair moved swiftly and silently through the outer grounds, keeping low as they darted between shadows. Étienne marveled at Isolde’s precision; every step she took was deliberate, her movements fluid and confident. He couldn’t help but grin. “You’ve done this before.”

“Once or twice,” she replied without turning, her tone clipped. “Focus.”

Reaching the outer wall, they pressed themselves against the cold stone. Above them, a pair of guards passed by on the parapet, their conversation casual. Isolde gestured toward a nearby ivy-covered trellis. Étienne frowned but followed her lead as she began to climb.

The ascent was precarious, the trellis creaking under their combined weight. Étienne muttered curses under his breath as they reached a narrow balcony. Isolde slipped through an unlocked window, landing silently in what appeared to be a deserted hallway.

Étienne joined her moments later, brushing dirt from his tunic. “I hope you know where this records room is.”

“Third floor, east wing,” Isolde whispered, moving quickly. “Stay close.”

The palace was eerily quiet, the grand hallways empty except for the occasional servant scurrying about. The pair kept to the shadows, avoiding open spaces and darting behind columns whenever footsteps approached. Étienne felt his pulse quicken with every narrow escape, but Isolde’s calm steadied him.

They reached the east wing without incident, but as they approached the records room, Étienne’s instincts prickled. He placed a hand on Isolde’s shoulder, stopping her. “Wait.”

“What is it?” she asked, her voice barely audible.

Étienne pointed to the faint glimmer of light seeping beneath the door. “Someone’s in there.”

Isolde’s brow furrowed. “The guards wouldn’t bother with the records room unless—”

“Unless they’re hiding something,” Étienne finished, drawing his blade.

Isolde pulled a dagger from her belt, nodding toward the door. “Follow my lead.”

She pushed the door open slowly, the hinges groaning slightly as they stepped inside. The room was vast, its walls lined with shelves overflowing with scrolls and ledgers. At the far end, two men in guard uniforms were rifling through a stack of papers, their movements hurried and tense.

“Looking for something?” Isolde said, her voice sharp and cutting.

The guards spun around, their hands going to their swords. Étienne was already moving, his blade flashing as he lunged at the closest one. The guard barely had time to draw his weapon before Étienne disarmed him with a swift strike and sent him sprawling to the ground.

Isolde engaged the second guard, her movements precise and efficient. She dodged his wild swings, her dagger finding a gap in his armor and forcing him to drop his weapon. Within moments, both guards were subdued, groaning on the floor.

“Not bad,” Étienne said, panting slightly.

“Don’t celebrate yet,” Isolde replied, stepping over the fallen guards. She moved toward the stack of papers they had been searching, her eyes scanning the scattered documents. “They were destroying evidence.”

Étienne joined her, flipping through the remaining papers. “Anything useful?”

Isolde held up a letter bearing the King’s seal. Her expression darkened as she read the contents aloud. “Orders for the movement of troops to ‘pacify’ dissenting regions. Specific instructions to target noble houses suspected of harboring sympathies for rebellion.”

Étienne whistled low. “That’s enough to turn a lot of heads.”

Isolde nodded, tucking the letter into her cloak. “And enough to put us at the top of the King’s list. We need to get out of here.”

Their escape was far less smooth than their entry. Alarms rang out moments after they left the records room, the bodies of the guards they had subdued likely discovered. The sound of boots thundered through the palace as soldiers swarmed the hallways.

“Down here!” Isolde called, leading Étienne into a narrow stairwell. They descended rapidly, their footsteps echoing in the confined space.

At the bottom, they found themselves in a storage corridor, the only exit blocked by a trio of armed guards. Étienne grinned, drawing his blade. “Well, this just got interesting.”

Isolde rolled her eyes but couldn’t suppress a smirk. “Let’s make it quick.”

The fight was brutal and fast. Étienne engaged the guards head-on, his strength and agility overwhelming them as he disarmed and incapacitated two with deft strikes. Isolde handled the third, her dagger slipping beneath his guard and sending him crashing to the ground.

They didn’t wait to celebrate. Darting through the corridor, they finally emerged into the palace gardens, the cool night air a stark contrast to the heat of their escape.

Étienne glanced back at the looming palace, shaking his head. “Remind me not to volunteer for this again.”

“You didn’t volunteer,” Isolde said with a faint smile. “You were volunteered.”

He laughed, his tension easing slightly as they disappeared into the forest. “Fair enough. Let’s hope Gabriel’s up for what comes next.”

As they vanished into the shadows, the evidence they carried burned against Isolde’s side—a reminder of the fight still ahead.

The hideout was quiet, save for the crackle of the fire and the sound of Gabriel’s steady breathing. He sat in the corner, his wounds still fresh but mending, as Isolde and Étienne laid out the stolen documents on the table between them. The letter bearing the King’s seal sat at the center, its damning contents a heavy weight in the room.

“This is it,” Étienne said, his voice cutting through the tension. “Proof of everything we’ve been saying. The King’s corruption, the Duke’s machinations—it’s all here.”

“And what do we do with it?” Isolde asked, her voice calm but laced with steel. “March into the capital and wave it around? The people aren’t ready to rise against the King. Not yet.”

Étienne frowned, his hands clenched into fists. “Then we make them ready. Spread the truth, expose the King for what he is. If the nobles see he’s vulnerable, they’ll turn on him.”

Gabriel stirred, his voice quiet but firm. “And then what? Another tyrant takes his place? A rebellion isn’t just a battle. It’s a war, and wars leave scars that last generations.”

Étienne turned toward Gabriel, his frustration evident. “So what’s your solution? We sit on this? Wait for the King to finish tightening his grip until there’s nothing left to save?”

“No,” Gabriel said, his eyes hard. “We use precision. We take the King out of the equation—permanently.”

The words hung in the air, stark and unrelenting. Isolde’s eyes narrowed, her voice sharp. “You’re suggesting assassination.”

Gabriel didn’t flinch. “Yes. It’s the fastest, cleanest way to end this. With the King gone, the Duke loses his patron, and his web of influence collapses. The nobles will rally, but without a figurehead, they’ll turn on each other instead of the people.”

Étienne shook his head, his jaw tight. “And replace one act of tyranny with another? Killing a King might solve today’s problem, but it creates a thousand more. The people will see us as murderers, not saviors.”

“The people will see freedom,” Gabriel countered. “Freedom from a ruler who uses them as pawns in his games. Sometimes, blood must be spilled to end oppression.”

Isolde stepped between them, her voice steady but commanding. “Enough. This isn’t just about what we think is right. This is about what’s possible.”

She glanced at the documents spread before them, her mind racing. “We have two options. We can use these papers to ignite a rebellion—one that will take years, cost countless lives, and leave the kingdom in ruins before it’s rebuilt. Or we can strike at the root of the problem,

take out the King, and destabilize the system enough to give people a chance to build something better.”

Étienne met her gaze, his voice quieter but no less intense. “You’re saying we play judge, jury, and executioner? Decide who lives and who dies for the good of the realm?”

“We’ve already been doing that,” Gabriel said coldly. “Every move we’ve made, every life we’ve taken—it’s all been leading to this. The only question is whether we have the will to finish it.”

Isolde sighed, running a hand through her hair. “This isn’t just about will, Gabriel. It’s about trust. Trust that the people we fight for won’t replace one tyranny with another.”

Étienne leaned forward, his expression fierce. “And what if they do? What if killing the King doesn’t change anything? The nobles will scramble for power, the Duke will find another puppet, and the people will suffer the same as before.”

Gabriel’s voice softened, his tone edged with regret. “Then at least we’ll have tried. At least we’ll have taken a step toward something better.”

The room fell silent, the weight of the decision pressing down on them. Each of them carried their own burdens, their own doubts and fears. The choice before them wasn’t just a matter of strategy—it was a question of morality, of legacy.

Isolde broke the silence, her voice steady but weary. “We need more time. More than one night to decide the future of a kingdom.”

Gabriel nodded reluctantly. “But not too much time. The King won’t wait, and neither will the Duke.”

Étienne exhaled sharply, leaning back in his chair. “Fine. We think. We plan. But one way or another, we act.”

The fire crackled, its light casting flickering shadows over their faces. The trio sat in uneasy silence, each lost in their thoughts. The path ahead was unclear, but one thing was certain: whatever choice they made, it would change the kingdom forever.

The faint rustle of leaves and the distant hoot of an owl were the only sounds that broke the silence of the night. Inside the dimly lit hideout, the tension between Gabriel, Isolde, and Étienne was palpable. The weight of their decision hung over them, unspoken but undeniable.

Gabriel sat sharpening his rapier, the repetitive scrape of metal on stone filling the air. Étienne paced restlessly, his hand brushing the hilt of his sword with every turn. Isolde stood near the window, her eyes fixed on the forest beyond, her mind racing through scenarios and contingencies.

“We’re not going to get much more time to decide,” Étienne muttered, breaking the silence. “Every second we stay here, we’re one step closer to being found.”

Isolde didn't respond immediately, her sharp eyes scanning the shadows outside. Something felt wrong—an unease she couldn't quite place. She stepped back from the window, her voice low but firm. "I think they already have."

Gabriel and Étienne froze, their heads snapping toward her. Gabriel stood, his grip tightening on his rapier. "What did you see?"

"Shadows," Isolde said, her voice clipped. "But not the kind that belong to trees."

Étienne cursed under his breath, moving quickly to extinguish the lantern. The room plunged into darkness, save for the faint glow of the embers in the hearth. Gabriel moved to the door, his ear pressed against the wood.

"They're here," he said, his voice barely audible. "Multiple boots. They're surrounding the building."

Étienne drew his blade, his movements silent and deliberate. "How the hell did they find us?"

"Does it matter?" Isolde replied, pulling a dagger from her belt. "We can't stay here. We need to move."

Gabriel shook his head, his voice grim. "There's no moving, not without fighting. They won't let us slip away this time."

A loud crash shattered the quiet as the front door burst inward, splintered wood scattering across the room. Royal guards flooded the hideout, their swords drawn and their armor glinting in the faint light. The trio sprang into action, their weapons ready.

Gabriel met the first guard head-on, his rapier moving with the precision of a master. His blade danced in the flickering light, parrying and striking with ruthless efficiency. Despite his injuries, he fought with the determination of a man who refused to let the fight end here.

Étienne engaged two guards at once, his raw strength and agility overwhelming them. He disarmed one with a swift strike to the wrist and sent the other sprawling with a brutal kick. "This is getting crowded!" he shouted over the din.

Isolde moved like a shadow, her dagger finding the gaps in the guards' armor with deadly accuracy. She ducked under a wild swing and countered with a quick thrust, her movements as precise as they were lethal. "We need an exit," she called, her voice steady despite the chaos.

Gabriel parried another strike, his teeth gritted against the strain. "The back door—Étienne, clear the way!"

Étienne nodded, charging toward the narrow hallway that led to the rear of the building. More guards emerged from the shadows, their swords raised, but Étienne's blade cut through their defenses with brutal efficiency. "Path's clear—for now!"

Isolde and Gabriel followed, their weapons flashing as they fought off the advancing guards. The trio moved as one, their movements synchronized despite the chaos. They reached the back door just as another wave of guards surged forward.

“We can’t outrun them forever,” Gabriel said, his breath labored.

“Then we don’t,” Isolde replied, her eyes blazing. “We hold them off long enough to disappear.”

Étienne smiled, his blade ready. “Now you’re speaking my language.”

The guards advanced, their numbers seemingly endless. The trio braced themselves, their backs to the door as the tide of steel and fury bore down on them. The sounds of battle filled the night, the clash of blades and the shouts of combat echoing through the trees.

As the fight raged on, a distant horn sounded, its mournful tone cutting through the chaos. The guards hesitated, their formation faltering as they exchanged uncertain glances.

“What’s that?” Étienne asked, his blade still raised.

Gabriel’s eyes narrowed, his breath steadying as he stepped forward. “Reinforcements,” he said grimly. “And not ours.”

Isolde’s jaw tightened, her grip on her dagger unyielding. “Then we make this count.”

The chapter ended with the trio standing their ground, the shadows closing in around them as the fight for their lives—and the fate of the kingdom—reached a critical turning point.

The Crimson Tide

The battlefield stretched across the rolling plains outside the capital, a patchwork of hastily assembled barricades and banners flying the colors of defiance. Smoke from distant fires mingled with the morning mist, the acrid smell of burning wood and oil carrying on the breeze. What had begun as whispers and secret meetings had erupted into open rebellion—a storm that now threatened to engulf the entire kingdom.

Gabriel stood atop a makeshift platform, addressing a crowd of farmers, blacksmiths, merchants, and soldiers who had been cast aside by the very kingdom they now sought to overthrow. His armor, patched and battered, bore no insignia of allegiance, only the wear of countless battles. His voice carried across the assembly, calm but fierce.

“We stand here not as conquerors, but as defenders,” Gabriel began, his eyes sweeping over the ragtag army. “Defenders of a future where honor isn’t dictated by a crown, where power doesn’t trample the weak. The King has ruled through fear and deception for too long, and now he seeks to crush us because we dare to say no.”

The crowd murmured in agreement, the tension palpable. Gabriel raised his voice, his words cutting through the din. “But remember this: we are not fighting for vengeance. We are fighting for the chance to choose. For our children to grow up in a kingdom that belongs to them—not to a tyrant.”

A cheer erupted, small but growing as Gabriel stepped back. Étienne, standing nearby, clapped him on the shoulder, his expression a mix of approval and mischief. “Not bad for an old man.”

Gabriel shot him a look, his lips twitching into a faint smile. “Don’t get too comfortable, Étienne. You’re leading the vanguard.”

Étienne grinned, drawing his sword and raising it high. “You hear that?” he called to the crowd. “If you want glory, you follow me. If you want to stay alive, you stay behind Gabriel!”

The crowd laughed, the tension easing slightly. Étienne jumped down from the platform, rallying a group of eager volunteers as he strode toward the front lines.

Isolde stood apart from the gathering, her crimson sash tied over her armor, a stark contrast against the grays and browns of the rebels. She was sharpening her blade with quiet precision, her face a mask of focus. Gabriel approached her, his tone soft but firm. “You’re still certain about this?”

She glanced up, her sharp eyes meeting his. “I’ve been certain since the day they killed my brother. This isn’t just a rebellion, Gabriel. It’s justice.”

He nodded, understanding the fire that drove her. “And after? When the dust settles?”

“Then we rebuild,” she said simply. “The right way this time.”

Gabriel didn’t press further. He knew Isolde’s resolve was unshakable, and in truth, he shared her belief that this was their only path. But the weight of what lay ahead hung heavy on them all.

The battle began with the distant thunder of drums, a signal that the King’s forces were mobilizing. The rebels, though outnumbered and outmatched in equipment, were ready. The hastily constructed defenses along the ridge gave them a tactical advantage, and their knowledge of the terrain was a weapon in itself.

Étienne led the charge on the left flank, his voice a rallying cry as he clashed with the King’s soldiers. His movements were a blur, his blade cutting through the chaos with brutal efficiency. He fought with the reckless abandon of a man who had faced death too many times to fear it.

“Hold the line!” he bellowed, his voice cutting through the cacophony. “No retreat, no surrender!”

On the right flank, Isolde led a smaller unit, her crimson sash billowing as she darted between skirmishes. Her blade found its mark time and again, each strike precise and deliberate. The

men and women under her command followed her without question, inspired by her fearlessness.

Gabriel moved between the ranks, offering commands and support where it was needed most. Though his body was still recovering, his mind was sharp, and his presence alone steadied the rebels' nerves. His strategies, honed over decades of warfare, turned the tide in skirmish after skirmish.

But the King's forces were relentless, their armor gleaming as they advanced in disciplined formations. The sound of their horns echoed across the battlefield, a reminder of their overwhelming power.

In the heart of the fray, Étienne found himself face-to-face with a royal captain, the man's ornate armor gleaming with gold trim. The captain's blade swung in a wide arc, narrowly missing Étienne as he ducked and countered with a brutal slash that left a deep gash in the man's leg.

"You fight well for a peasant," the captain sneered, blood staining his lips.

"I fight well because I have something to fight for," Étienne retorted, delivering a final blow that sent the captain sprawling into the mud.

On the ridge, Isolde spotted a unit of royal archers taking aim at the rebel ranks. Her heart raced as she calculated the time it would take for her group to reach them. "With me!" she shouted, leading her soldiers in a daring charge. They reached the archers just as the first volley loosed, cutting them down before they could reload.

The archers' commander, a wiry man with a cruel grin, turned his attention to Isolde. "You're the Crimson Phantom," he said, recognition flashing in his eyes.

"And you're a dead man," she replied, her blade flashing in the sunlight as she struck him down.

By midday, the battlefield was a chaos of fire and steel. The rebels had held their ground longer than anyone expected, but the cost was high. Bodies littered the field, and the cries of the wounded mingled with the clash of swords and the thunder of cannons.

Gabriel regrouped with Isolde and Étienne near a damaged barricade, their expressions grim but determined. "We're holding," Gabriel said, his voice steady despite the chaos. "But we can't sustain this forever."

"We don't need forever," Isolde said, her eyes blazing. "Just long enough to break their spirit."

Étienne grinned, blood streaking his face. "And break their spirit we will."

The trio shared a brief nod, the weight of their task unspoken but understood. The battle was far from over, but their resolve was unshakable. Together, they would turn the tide of the rebellion—and decide the fate of the kingdom.

The lull in the battle was brief, the kind of uneasy silence that made seasoned warriors brace for what came next. Gabriel stood at the ridge's edge, his eyes scanning the distant tree line where the King's forces had regrouped. Smoke drifted across the battlefield, carrying with it the acrid scent of blood and ash. Étienne approached, wiping a streak of dirt from his face.

"They're preparing for something," Étienne said, his tone grim. "Something big."

"They're reorganizing," Gabriel replied. His years of experience told him what to expect: the disciplined movements, the strategic pauses. The King's forces weren't retreating—they were setting the stage for a counterattack. His stomach churned as he recognized the calculated precision of the troops assembling in the distance. This wasn't just any army. This was Montclair's army.

The sound of drums began to roll, low and steady, growing louder with each beat. From the haze of the tree line emerged Laurent Montclair, clad in shining armor, his blade raised high. His presence was magnetic, drawing the eyes of every soldier under his command. Behind him, fresh troops poured forward, their formation tight and unyielding.

Gabriel's grip on his rapier tightened as he turned to Étienne. "It's Montclair. He's leading them."

Étienne frowned, his expression darkening. "Your friend from the duel? Seems he's not one to let grudges go."

"He's not my friend," Gabriel said sharply. "And this isn't a grudge. He's here to end us."

The King's forces surged forward, their vanguard a wall of shields and spears. Arrows rained down from the rebel archers, but Montclair's troops raised their shields in unison, their discipline unwavering. The impact was immediate and brutal as they crashed into the rebel lines, shoving aside hastily built barricades with sheer force.

Gabriel fought at the front, his rapier slicing through the chaos with practiced precision. He parried a spear thrust and countered with a lunge, the point of his blade finding its mark in the gap of a soldier's armor. Another attacker came at him, and he sidestepped, letting Étienne finish the man with a powerful swing of his sword.

"Gabriel!" Étienne shouted over the din. "We're losing ground!"

Gabriel turned, his eyes scanning the battlefield. Montclair's troops had already breached the left flank, where the rebels were struggling to hold their line. If they fell there, the entire formation would collapse.

"Isolde!" Gabriel called, searching for her crimson sash among the melee.

She emerged from the chaos, blood streaking her face but her expression unyielding. "What is it?"

"The left flank is breaking," Gabriel said, his tone urgent. "Take whoever you can and reinforce it. If we lose that position, it's over."

Isolde nodded, her dagger glinting as she motioned for a group of nearby fighters to follow her. “Hold them here,” she said. “I’ll handle the flank.”

Gabriel watched her go, then turned back to Étienne. “We have to hold this ridge.”

Étienne smirked, raising his blade. “Wasn’t planning on going anywhere.”

Montclair cut through the rebel forces with chilling efficiency, his blade moving like liquid fire. His armor gleamed even through the grime of battle, and his voice rang out, a commanding presence that seemed to embolden his troops. He fought not as a man, but as a symbol of the King’s power—unyielding, unstoppable.

Gabriel caught sight of him through the chaos, their eyes locking for a brief moment. Montclair’s expression was calm, almost amused, as if daring Gabriel to face him again. But Gabriel knew better than to be baited. This wasn’t about personal grudges. It was about survival.

On the left flank, Isolde led her fighters into the fray, her crimson sash a beacon of defiance. The rebels were outnumbered, but her precise strikes and unrelenting determination rallied them. She dodged a soldier’s blade and countered with a thrust that sent him sprawling, her movements fluid and deadly.

“Hold the line!” she shouted, her voice cutting through the noise. “We don’t retreat!”

A group of Montclair’s soldiers pressed forward, their shields forming a solid wall. Isolde’s unit braced for the impact, but the sheer force of the assault sent several rebels tumbling backward. Isolde gritted her teeth, her dagger flashing as she leapt into the breach, slashing and stabbing with feral intensity.

Meanwhile, Étienne fought like a whirlwind, his blade carving through the advancing soldiers. His raw strength and agility made him a force to be reckoned with, but even he couldn’t hold forever. He glanced toward Gabriel, who was locked in a fierce battle with a pair of swordsmen.

“We’re losing too many!” Étienne called out. “We need a miracle!”

Gabriel dispatched one of his opponents with a well-placed thrust and turned to Étienne, his face grim. “Miracles are in short supply today.”

The tide of the battle shifted as Montclair’s forces pushed the rebels back toward the ridge’s summit. The once-organized defenses had devolved into chaos, with fighters breaking ranks and fleeing as the pressure mounted. Gabriel knew they couldn’t hold much longer.

Montclair strode forward, his presence commanding as he reached the heart of the battlefield. His voice carried above the clash of steel. “Lay down your arms, rebels! Surrender, and you may yet live.”

Gabriel stepped forward, his rapier raised. “This fight isn’t over, Montclair.”

Montclair's eyes glinted with recognition, his smile faint but chilling. "Still clinging to hope, old man? How quaint."

Their blades met with a clash that sent sparks flying, the noise silencing the chaos around them for a brief moment. The duel reignited their rivalry, but this time, the stakes were higher than personal pride. This was a battle for the soul of the rebellion—and the kingdom itself.

The chapter ended with the rebels teetering on the brink of collapse, their leaders fighting desperately to hold the line as Montclair's forces pressed closer. The battlefield was a cacophony of death and defiance, the outcome uncertain as the crimson tide surged and receded.

The battlefield was chaos—shouts, the clash of steel, and the cries of the wounded blended into a deafening roar. Étienne pushed forward through the melee, his sword carving a path toward the ridge's crest. Blood and dirt streaked his face, but his determination remained unshaken. He had fought in countless battles, but this one was different. This one meant something.

Then, he saw him.

Scar, his former mercenary commander, stood atop the ridge, barking orders to a squad of heavily armored soldiers. His presence was unmistakable: a towering man with a scar running from his temple to his jaw, the mark of a blade long since forgotten. His armor was dark and imposing, his curved sword glinting in the sunlight. Étienne froze, the memories flooding back.

Scar had once been a mentor, a figure Étienne had reluctantly admired. But that admiration had soured long ago when Scar's greed and ruthlessness had driven the mercenary band into atrocities Étienne could no longer stomach. Scar's betrayal of their shared code—the thin thread of honor Étienne had clung to—was why Étienne had walked away, branded a traitor.

Now, Scar stood here, fighting for the King, his voice cutting through the din. "Hold the line! Cut them down like the rats they are!"

Étienne's grip tightened on his sword. This wasn't just another battle. This was personal.

Scar turned as Étienne approached, a grin spreading across his face. "Well, well. If it isn't my favorite deserter."

Étienne didn't hesitate. He raised his blade and pointed it at Scar, his voice low and deadly. "I didn't desert. I left because I couldn't stomach what you'd become."

Scar chuckled, the sound rough and mocking. "Still clinging to that old code, are you? Honor doesn't win wars, boy. Power does."

Étienne's jaw tightened. "We'll see about that."

Scar motioned for his soldiers to stand back, drawing his own sword with a flourish. "I've been waiting for this moment, Étienne. Let's see if you've grown up—or if you're still the sniveling pup who ran from a real fight."

The two men circled each other, the battlefield seeming to shrink around them. Soldiers on both sides paused, their attention drawn to the confrontation. Even amidst the chaos, the duel commanded the air, its gravity undeniable.

Scar struck first, his curved blade slicing through the air with brutal force. Étienne parried, the impact jolting up his arm. Scar was as powerful as Étienne remembered, his strikes heavy and relentless. But Étienne wasn't the same fighter he'd been years ago. He sidestepped Scar's next swing, countering with a quick thrust that forced his former commander back.

"Not bad," Scar said, his grin widening. "You've learned a few tricks."

Étienne didn't reply. He moved with purpose, his strikes fast and precise, testing Scar's defenses. But Scar was no amateur. He countered with calculated ease, his blade spinning in a deadly arc that forced Étienne onto the defensive.

"You think you're better than me?" Scar taunted, his voice dripping with disdain. "You're nothing without me. I made you."

"You made a monster," Étienne shot back, his voice steady. "I chose to be something more."

Their blades clashed again, sparks flying as the force of their strikes echoed across the ridge. Scar pressed the attack, his strength driving Étienne back step by step. But Étienne wasn't finished. He ducked under a sweeping blow and slashed upward, his blade grazing Scar's arm.

Scar growled, the grin vanishing from his face. "You've got fire, I'll give you that. But fire burns out."

The duel raged on, a battle of skill and will. Étienne fought with everything he had, his movements fueled by years of anger and betrayal. Scar, for all his brute strength, underestimated the man Étienne had become.

"You're slowing down, old man," Étienne said, dodging another heavy swing.

Scar snarled, his strikes growing wilder. "You think you've won? You've got no idea what it takes to survive."

"Surviving isn't enough," Étienne replied, his voice rising. "It never was."

With a burst of speed, Étienne feinted left, drawing Scar's blade wide, then spun and drove his sword into Scar's side. The blow wasn't fatal, but it was deep enough to stagger him. Scar dropped to one knee, his hand clutching his wound as blood seeped through his fingers.

Étienne stood over him, his sword poised for the final strike. "You could have been more," he said, his voice heavy with both anger and sorrow. "But you chose this."

Scar chuckled weakly, blood staining his teeth. "And you chose a losing side."

Étienne hesitated, his blade trembling. The weight of their history bore down on him, the memories of what Scar had once been clashing with the reality of what he had become. Finally, Étienne lowered his sword.

“You’re not worth it,” he said, turning away.

Scar’s laughter turned bitter, echoing in Étienne’s ears as he walked back toward the rebel lines. But as Étienne moved, he knew he had won—not just the duel, but the battle against the darkness Scar had tried to instill in him.

The rebel fighters rallied behind Étienne’s victory, their morale bolstered as the tide of the battle began to turn. But Étienne knew the fight wasn’t over. Scar’s defeat was only one step toward something greater—and the hardest battles were still to come.

The battlefield was a cacophony of chaos—clashing steel, the shouts of commands, and the cries of the fallen. Yet for Isolde, it all faded into the background as she locked eyes with her target. **Count Merignac**, the man who had killed her brother in cold blood, stood at the crest of a broken barricade, surveying the carnage with a cold, calculating expression. His golden armor gleamed in the fading sunlight, a stark contrast to the blood-soaked ground around him.

Isolde tightened her grip on her blade, her crimson sash fluttering in the wind. This moment had been years in the making. Every step she had taken, every risk she had faced, had led her here. She moved forward with purpose, her eyes never leaving the Count.

He saw her coming, a smirk spreading across his face as he descended from his vantage point. His blade, a long and ornate rapier, caught the light as he twirled it lazily. “Ah, the Crimson Phantom,” he said, his voice dripping with mockery. “I was beginning to think you’d lost your nerve.”

Isolde stopped a few paces away, her chest heaving as she fought to keep her emotions in check. “You know who I am.”

Merignac’s smirk widened. “Of course. I recognized you the moment you stepped into the tournament. You’ve grown bold since the day your brother fell at my feet.”

Her blade rose, its point steady despite the fire coursing through her veins. “You won’t walk away from this.”

Merignac chuckled, his stance shifting into a ready position. “Brave words, girl. But bravery won’t save you.”

The duel began with a clash of steel, their blades meeting in a flurry of strikes and parries. Merignac’s movements were sharp and calculated, the refined style of a court-trained swordsman. Isolde, by contrast, fought with raw intensity, her strikes fast and relentless, driven by years of pain and determination.

“You’ve improved,” Merignac said, deflecting a series of quick thrusts. “But skill alone isn’t enough to best me.”

Isolde didn't reply. Her focus was absolute, her movements fluid as she pressed the attack. She darted to the side, feinting a low strike before aiming high. The Count barely managed to block, his smirk faltering as he realized he had underestimated her.

The duel raged across the battlefield, drawing the attention of soldiers on both sides. The clamor of the larger fight seemed to pause as those nearby watched the clash unfold. Isolde and Merignac moved like shadows, their blades dancing in the blood-streaked dirt.

"You fight like a wild animal," Merignac sneered, parrying a strike and countering with a slash that grazed her shoulder. "No discipline, no precision. Just rage."

"And you fight like a coward," Isolde shot back, her voice cutting as sharp as her blade. "Hiding behind your rank, your money, your lies."

Her words stung, and Merignac's attacks grew more aggressive. He lunged forward, his blade slicing toward her heart. Isolde sidestepped, her dagger flashing as she scored a deep cut across his arm. Blood seeped through his armor, and he staggered back, his expression twisting with anger.

"You'll regret that," he hissed, his composure slipping.

Isolde seized the moment, pressing her advantage. She struck again and again, her blade finding the gaps in his armor with surgical precision. Each blow was a reminder of her brother, of the pain she had carried since the day he died.

But Merignac wasn't finished. With a roar, he charged, his strikes wild but powerful. Isolde barely managed to parry the onslaught, her feet slipping in the mud as she fought to hold her ground. A well-timed thrust from the Count pierced her side, and she gasped, the pain searing as blood darkened her sash.

Merignac laughed, his confidence returning. "You see? This is where vengeance gets you. Broken, bleeding, and powerless."

Isolde gritted her teeth, her vision blurring as she tightened her grip on her blade. "You're wrong."

With a sudden burst of strength, she twisted away from his next attack, using the momentum to deliver a devastating upward slash. Her blade caught Merignac beneath his breastplate, slicing deep into his torso. He staggered, his sword falling from his hand as he dropped to his knees.

Isolde stood over him, her breathing ragged, her hand clutching her wounded side. Merignac looked up at her, his expression a mix of shock and disbelief. "You... think this will change anything?"

"It changes everything," Isolde said, her voice steady despite the pain. She raised her blade, the weight of her brother's memory driving her final strike.

Merignac fell, his lifeless body crumpling to the ground. The battlefield seemed to exhale, the soldiers watching in silence as the Crimson Phantom stood victorious.

Étienne appeared moments later, his sword still drawn as he scanned the area for threats. When he saw Isolde swaying, he rushed to her side, catching her before she could collapse.

“You did it,” he said, his tone equal parts awe and concern.

“He’s gone,” Isolde murmured, her voice faint. “It’s done.”

Étienne helped her to her feet, his grip firm. “Not yet. We still have a battle to win.”

Isolde nodded weakly, her resolve unbroken despite her wounds. Together, they moved back toward the rebel lines, the tide of the battle shifting as word of Merignac’s death spread. The Count’s soldiers faltered, their confidence shattered, and the rebels seized the moment to press their advantage.

The duel had been won, but the fight for the kingdom was far from over.

The palace gates stood battered and broken, their iron hinges twisted from the force of the rebellion’s assault. Smoke rose from the lower courtyards, where fires still smoldered from the final push. The sound of clashing steel and cries of defiance had faded, replaced by an eerie quiet as the rebels poured into the grand halls, sweeping aside the remnants of the King’s forces.

Gabriel led the way, his battered armor streaked with blood and soot. His steps were steady, but his heart was heavy. This was the moment they had fought for, the culmination of all their sacrifices. Yet it didn’t feel like victory—not yet.

Behind him, Étienne and Isolde followed, both worn but resolute. Isolde leaned slightly on Étienne for support, her side bandaged hastily during a brief respite. Despite her wounds, her eyes burned with determination.

“Keep moving,” Gabriel said, his voice firm but quiet. “We finish this.”

The grand throne room loomed ahead, its gilded doors slightly ajar. Gabriel pushed them open with a creak, revealing the opulence within. The high vaulted ceiling glittered with chandeliers, their light casting sharp reflections on the polished marble floor. At the far end, the King sat slumped on his gilded throne, his crown askew and his face pale.

The room was empty save for a handful of rebel fighters who had already subdued the last of the royal guards. The King raised his head as Gabriel approached, his eyes narrowing as he straightened his posture. He was older than Gabriel remembered, his once imposing frame now gaunt, his regal robes stained and torn.

“So,” the King said, his voice weary but defiant. “You’ve come to claim your prize.”

Gabriel stopped a few paces from the throne, his rapier still drawn but lowered. He studied the man before him, the symbol of everything they had fought against. “Your reign is over,” Gabriel said simply.

The King chuckled bitterly. “And what will you do now, d’Artois? Crown yourself the new tyrant? Or will you put me to the sword and call it justice?”

Étienne stepped forward, his hand resting on the hilt of his sword. “After everything you’ve done, you don’t deserve to live.”

Isolde, her voice steady despite her exhaustion, added, “The blood on your hands could drown this kingdom. Your death would be a mercy compared to what you’ve inflicted.”

Gabriel remained silent, his eyes locked on the King. The man’s words cut deeper than he cared to admit, not because they were wrong, but because they echoed his own doubts. What came next would shape the future of the kingdom—and the burden of that choice weighed heavily on him.

The King sneered. “You think this will end with me? The nobles, the merchants, the generals—they’re all complicit. Kill me, and another will rise to take my place.”

Gabriel tightened his grip on his rapier, his thoughts racing. Killing the King would be easy, a final act to end a war that had claimed so many lives. But what would it prove? What would it change?

He lowered his blade.

“No,” Gabriel said, his voice firm. “Your fate isn’t mine to decide.”

The King’s eyes widened in surprise. “You mean to let me live?”

Gabriel turned to the rebels gathered in the hall, his voice rising so all could hear. “This man doesn’t deserve mercy, but he also doesn’t deserve to be a martyr. Let the people decide his fate—the ones who’ve suffered under his rule. Let them see him for what he is.”

The room fell silent, the weight of Gabriel’s words settling over the rebels. Étienne frowned, his expression conflicted. “And what if they let him go? What if this backfires?”

“Then it’s their choice,” Gabriel replied, his tone resolute. “Not ours.”

Isolde stepped forward, her gaze hard and unyielding. “You’re putting a lot of faith in people who’ve been trampled for years.”

Gabriel met her eyes. “It’s the only way this ends without becoming what we fought against.”

Reluctantly, she nodded, though her hand lingered on her dagger. Étienne sighed, shaking his head but stepping back. “Fine. But if he so much as breathes wrong, I won’t hesitate.”

The rebels seized the King, binding his hands as they led him from the throne. The man who had ruled with an iron fist now looked small, his defiance replaced by a flicker of fear. Gabriel watched as the doors closed behind him, the throne room falling silent once more.

Later, as the sun began to rise over the smoldering city, Gabriel stood on the balcony overlooking the capital. The streets below were filled with people—peasants, merchants, soldiers—all gathered to witness the end of an era. The King’s trial would be held in the square, a public reckoning that Gabriel hoped would mark the beginning of something new.

Étienne joined him, leaning against the railing. “You sure about this?”

“No,” Gabriel admitted. “But it’s not about being sure. It’s about giving them a chance to choose their future.”

Isolde appeared on his other side, her wounds freshly tended but her spirit unbroken. “And if they choose wrong?”

“Then it’s still their choice,” Gabriel said quietly. “We’ve done our part.”

The three of them stood in silence, watching as the city stirred with the first light of dawn. The rebellion had won, but the real battle was only just beginning. The kingdom was theirs to rebuild, a fragile hope that would require more than swords and strategy. It would require trust.

As the bells of the palace began to ring, Gabriel felt a strange sense of peace. The King’s fate was no longer in their hands. It belonged to the people—the ones who had bled, fought, and endured for this moment.

The tide had turned. Now, it was time to see where it would carry them.

Legacy of Honor

The capital was a city transformed. The streets that once echoed with the heavy boots of royal guards were now filled with the laughter and cheers of liberated citizens. The towering banners bearing the King’s crest had been torn down, replaced by simple flags sewn hastily by the people—symbols of their newfound freedom. Yet amidst the celebration, the scars of war remained visible: burned-out buildings, hastily dug graves, and the haunted expressions of those who had survived.

In the palace, now repurposed as a provisional seat of the rebellion’s leadership, Gabriel, Isolde, and Étienne sat in a private chamber. The room was quieter than it had been in weeks, the sounds of battle replaced by the faint murmur of voices outside. The trio had been heralded as heroes, their names on the lips of every citizen who had fought and bled for the rebellion. Yet none of them wore the expressions of victors.

Gabriel leaned against the edge of a grand table, his rapier sheathed but still within reach. His face was pale, his body still recovering from the wounds he had sustained. The weight of leadership hung heavy on his shoulders. For decades, he had lived as a soldier and a teacher, but this—being the face of a revolution—was an unfamiliar and unwelcome role.

Isolde sat in a high-backed chair, her crimson sash draped over her lap. The wound she had suffered in her duel with Merignac was healing, but the pain lingered. She stared out the window, her expression unreadable as she watched the people below. They chanted her name—“The Crimson Phantom”—but the sound brought her no comfort. Merignac was gone, yet the ache of her brother’s absence had not diminished.

Étienne, ever restless, paced the room, his hand brushing the hilt of his sword. He had always thrived in the chaos of battle, but now that the fighting was over, he felt adrift. The rebels celebrated him as a champion, but the memories of those he had killed—some he had once called comrades—haunted him.

“They’re calling it a new era,” Étienne said finally, breaking the silence. His voice was laced with sarcasm. “Freedom, justice, equality. All the things we fought for. And yet I can’t help but wonder how long it’ll last.”

Gabriel looked up, his gaze heavy. “It lasts as long as the people are willing to fight for it. That’s what we gave them—a chance to choose. But whether they can hold onto it...” He trailed off, his meaning clear.

Isolde turned from the window, her voice soft but cutting. “The question is whether we’ll hold onto ourselves. We’ve all lost something to get here.”

Étienne stopped pacing, turning to face her. “And what do we do now? Sit in this palace and play politicians? That’s not what we’re made for.”

“No,” Gabriel said firmly, straightening. “We don’t become what we fought against. We helped bring the King down, but this isn’t our kingdom to rule. It belongs to the people.”

“And what if they want us to lead?” Isolde asked, her sharp gaze meeting his. “They’re already talking about you as a leader, Gabriel. They want a council, and they want you at its head.”

Gabriel’s expression darkened. “I’m no leader. I’ve spent my life teaching others how to fight, not how to govern.”

Étienne smirked faintly, though it didn’t reach his eyes. “That makes you better than most who sit on thrones. At least you don’t want it.”

Gabriel shook his head. “It’s not about what I want. It’s about what’s right. If we stay in power, if we cling to the roles they want us to play, we risk becoming the very thing we fought to destroy.”

Isolde leaned back in her chair, her fingers brushing the edge of her crimson sash. “So, what then? We walk away and hope they don’t fall back into the same traps? Hope that those who rise to power don’t betray them?”

Gabriel’s eyes softened, his tone quiet but resolute. “We can’t control the future. But we can guide it. We can make sure the people have the tools to protect themselves. We can teach them what we’ve learned.”

Étienne laughed softly, though there was no humor in it. “You make it sound so simple. But you know as well as I do that power corrupts. And there will always be men like Scar, like Merignac, like the King.”

“Yes,” Gabriel admitted. “But there will also be people like us. People willing to stand against them. That’s the legacy we leave—not as rulers, but as teachers.”

Isolde nodded slowly, her gaze turning inward. “Then we have work to do.”

The chamber fell silent again, but the mood had shifted. Though the weight of the rebellion’s cost remained, a sense of clarity had begun to emerge. They weren’t rulers, and they didn’t want to be. Their role was not to govern but to ensure that those who did would be held accountable.

The door to the chamber creaked open, and a young rebel entered, his face flushed with excitement. “They’re ready for you,” he said, his voice trembling slightly. “The people want to hear from their heroes.”

Gabriel glanced at Isolde and Étienne, who exchanged weary but knowing looks. “We’re coming,” Gabriel said, his voice steady.

As they stepped out onto the palace balcony, the roar of the crowd greeted them—a sea of faces filled with hope, fear, and anticipation. Gabriel, Isolde, and Étienne stood side by side, united not by the titles they had been given, but by the sacrifices they had made and the ideals they shared.

Gabriel raised a hand, and the crowd fell silent, their eyes fixed on him. He spoke not as a leader, but as a man who had seen the best and worst of what humanity could offer.

“This kingdom belongs to you now,” he said, his voice carrying across the square. “We fought for freedom, for the chance to choose our own paths. That freedom comes with responsibility—to each other, to this land, and to the future.”

He paused, his gaze sweeping over the crowd. “We are not your rulers. We are your allies. And though our fight is over, yours is just beginning.”

The crowd erupted into cheers, their voices rising like a wave. Gabriel turned to Isolde and Étienne, their expressions mirroring his own mixture of pride and uncertainty. They had done their part, but the true test lay ahead.

As the cheers continued, the trio exchanged a quiet look of understanding. Their paths would soon diverge, but the bond they had forged—born of blood, sacrifice, and honor—would endure. Together, they had reshaped the kingdom’s destiny. Now, it was up to the people to carry that legacy forward.

The smell of fresh-cut grass and the sound of wooden swords clashing filled the small training yard. Gabriel watched from the shade of an old oak tree, his arms crossed as two students sparred in the dappled sunlight. Their movements were clumsy but earnest, the awkward determination of youth striving for mastery. He called out corrections now and then, his tone firm but patient.

“Keep your guard up, Matthieu! You’re not swinging an axe,” he barked, his voice carrying across the yard. The boy straightened, adjusting his stance, but stumbled when his partner countered with a quick thrust.

Gabriel sighed, stepping forward. “Stop. Both of you.”

The boys froze, their faces flushed with exertion and embarrassment. Gabriel gently took Matthieu's wooden sword, demonstrating a basic parry. "It's not about brute strength," he said, his voice softer now. "It's about precision. Control. Anticipate where the blade will go, not where it is."

He handed the sword back and gestured for them to try again. The boys resumed their sparring, their movements slightly more disciplined this time. Gabriel stepped back, letting them find their rhythm.

Teaching had always come naturally to him, though he had never intended to return to it. After the rebellion's victory, the calls for him to join the new council had been loud and persistent. But Gabriel had declined. The thought of sitting in a chamber, debating laws and policies, filled him with a sense of unease. He had spent too many years in the thick of conflict, too many years shaping others into instruments of war. What he wanted now, more than anything, was peace.

Yet peace was elusive. Even here, in this quiet village far from the capital, Gabriel felt the shadows of his past pressing against him.

After dismissing the students for the day, Gabriel sat alone on the edge of the training yard, his rapier resting across his knees. The weapon felt heavier than it once had, its blade polished but worn, a reminder of the countless battles it had seen. He ran a hand over the hilt, his mind drifting.

The faces of those he had lost haunted him still. Philippe, his bright-eyed pupil, eager to prove himself. The men and women who had followed him into rebellion, some never to return. The soldiers who had fallen beneath his blade, their lives extinguished by his choices.

Gabriel exhaled slowly, his gaze fixed on the horizon. "Violence," he murmured to himself, "always breeds more violence."

He had believed the rebellion was necessary, that the kingdom's corruption had to be torn out at its roots. But as he reflected on the bloodshed, he couldn't help but wonder if the cycle had truly been broken—or merely shifted. The King was gone, and a council now ruled in his stead, but power had a way of corrupting even the best intentions. Gabriel knew that better than most.

A familiar voice broke his thoughts. "Brooding again, I see."

Gabriel turned to see **Isolde** approaching, her movements careful but confident. Her injuries from the rebellion had healed, though she still carried a slight limp. She wore a simple tunic, her crimson sash replaced with a more subdued belt. In her hand, she carried a bottle of wine.

"I thought you were supposed to be busy rebuilding the capital," Gabriel said, a faint smile tugging at his lips.

"I am," Isolde replied, sitting beside him and offering the bottle. "But even I need a break."

Gabriel took the wine and poured a measure into a small cup. He handed it to her before pouring one for himself. "How's it going?"

“Slowly,” she admitted. “The people are hopeful, but hope doesn’t rebuild cities or feed families. It’s hard work, and not everyone agrees on how to do it.”

Gabriel chuckled softly. “Sounds like you’ve taken to politics better than I would.”

“Not by choice,” Isolde said, smirking. “But someone has to make sure the council doesn’t get too comfortable.”

They sat in silence for a while, the shared understanding of their burdens unspoken but palpable. Finally, Isolde spoke again, her tone quieter. “Do you regret it? Any of it?”

Gabriel’s fingers brushed the hilt of his rapier as he considered her question. “I regret the lives we lost,” he said honestly. “The choices we had to make. But I don’t regret fighting for something better.”

Isolde nodded, her gaze distant. “It’s strange, isn’t it? We spent so long fighting, and now that it’s over, it’s hard to know what to do.”

Gabriel smiled faintly. “You’re doing something. That’s more than most.”

“And you?” she asked, gesturing to the training yard. “Teaching children how to fight? That doesn’t seem very peaceful.”

“No,” Gabriel admitted. “But it’s different. I’m not teaching them to kill. I’m teaching them discipline, control. I’m giving them tools—not orders.”

Isolde raised her cup in a mock toast. “To tools, then. And to knowing when to use them.”

Gabriel clinked his cup against hers, the sound soft in the evening air. “To knowing when to stop,” he added.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, Gabriel watched the last of its light fade from the sky. He knew he couldn’t undo the choices he had made or the lives he had taken. But here, in this small village, he could try to shape something better—one student, one lesson at a time. It wasn’t redemption, but it was a start.

And for now, it was enough.

Étienne stood at the crest of the hill overlooking his village, the setting sun casting long shadows over the fields and the clusters of thatched roofs below. It was just as he remembered it—small, humble, and nestled in the valley like a secret the world had forgotten. The smell of freshly tilled earth and the faint sound of a blacksmith hammering in the distance filled the air, stirring memories Étienne hadn’t revisited in years.

But the village wasn’t untouched by the rebellion. There were scars—houses burned and hastily rebuilt, farmland trampled by marching soldiers, and faces etched with weariness. As he made his way down the hill, the villagers began to notice him. First, a curious glance, then a murmur. By the time he reached the main square, a small crowd had gathered, their expressions a mix of recognition and disbelief.

“It’s Étienne,” someone whispered.

“Is it really him?”

“Didn’t he leave years ago?”

Étienne raised a hand in greeting, his weathered face breaking into a small, uncertain smile. “I’m back,” he said simply.

The words hung in the air for a moment before an elderly man stepped forward. **Marcel**, the village elder, leaned heavily on a cane but stood tall, his piercing gaze fixed on Étienne. “You’ve been gone a long time, boy.”

“I know,” Étienne replied, his tone steady but tinged with regret. “And I’ve come back to make things right.”

The villagers welcomed Étienne with cautious warmth, their initial hesitation giving way to curiosity. They gathered in the central square as he recounted the story of the rebellion—his role in the fight, the battles they had won, and the sacrifices they had made. He didn’t shy away from the truth, nor did he try to paint himself as a hero.

“I left this place because I thought I could find something better,” Étienne said, his voice carrying over the crowd. “But all I found was blood and regret. I fought for others, followed orders I didn’t believe in, and lost pieces of myself along the way. It took a war to remind me of what matters most.”

He gestured toward the village, his eyes sweeping over the crowd. “This place. All of you. You’re what matters. And I swear, I won’t leave again.”

The crowd murmured, their faces a mix of relief and hope. Étienne saw children clinging to their parents’ legs, elderly farmers leaning on weathered tools, and young men and women who bore the same restlessness he had once felt. These were his people, and he owed them more than words.

Over the following weeks, Étienne set about fulfilling his promise. He worked alongside the villagers, repairing damaged homes, rebuilding fences, and clearing fields for planting. His strength, honed over years of battle, made him an invaluable presence, but it was his humility that won their trust. He didn’t act like a hero returned from war—he acted like one of them.

He also began organizing a militia, though he hesitated to call it that. “This isn’t about creating soldiers,” he explained to the young men and women who volunteered. “It’s about protecting what’s ours. The rebellion may have ended, but the world is still dangerous. Bandits, mercenaries, even remnants of the King’s forces—they’ll see us as easy prey unless we show them we’re not.”

Under Étienne’s guidance, the villagers learned to defend themselves. They practiced with wooden swords and spears, set up watch posts on the outskirts, and reinforced the village gates. Étienne’s lessons were practical, grounded in the harsh realities he had seen firsthand.

“Don’t fight for glory,” he told them. “Fight for your families, for your home. That’s all the reason you need.”

One evening, as Étienne sat outside his modest home sharpening his blade, Marcel approached, his cane tapping softly against the ground. The elder lowered himself onto the bench beside Étienne with a groan, his weathered face thoughtful.

“You’ve done good work here,” Marcel said, his voice gravelly. “The people trust you.”

Étienne nodded, his hands pausing. “I’m not looking to lead them. I just want to make sure they’re safe.”

Marcel chuckled softly. “You might not be looking to lead, but that doesn’t mean you aren’t leading. People follow those who show them the way. Whether you want it or not, you’ve become their guide.”

Étienne exhaled, leaning back against the wall of the house. “I spent so many years following others. I never thought I’d be the one others looked to.”

Marcel patted his shoulder, his grip surprisingly firm. “You’ve earned it, boy. But don’t forget—leadership isn’t about power. It’s about responsibility.”

Étienne nodded slowly, the elder’s words settling over him. Responsibility. It was a weight he had tried to avoid for much of his life, but now, it felt right. It felt like purpose.

As the days turned into weeks, Étienne found a strange sense of peace in the rhythm of village life. The burdens of the rebellion lingered, but they were softened by the warmth of the community he had returned to. He wasn’t sure if redemption was possible—not after everything he had done—but here, in this quiet place, he could try to be better.

One evening, as the sun dipped below the horizon, Étienne stood at the edge of the village, watching the fields sway in the breeze. A faint smile crossed his lips. For the first time in years, he felt like he belonged.

And he would fight to protect it, no matter what.

The capital city buzzed with activity, the streets alive with the sounds of rebuilding. Merchants hawked wares in newly opened markets, children ran through alleys untouched by war, and courtiers flitted between meetings in the grand halls of the provisional council. The palace, no longer a symbol of tyranny, now bore banners of unity crafted by the people themselves. Yet, despite the transformation, Isolde felt out of place.

She stood in the council chamber, a vast room that had once been the King’s throne room. Its marble floors gleamed, and sunlight streamed through tall windows, casting a warm glow over the proceedings. Around a large circular table sat the newly appointed members of the council—a mix of former rebels, merchants, and lesser nobles. They debated animatedly, their voices rising and falling in a symphony of ideas and disagreements.

At the head of the table, one of the councilors addressed her. “Lady Isolde,” he said, his tone reverent. “Your leadership during the rebellion was invaluable. The people trust you, and your voice carries weight. We believe you would be an excellent addition to this council.”

Isolde’s gaze flicked to the chair they had left empty for her. Ornate, upholstered in crimson velvet, it was a throne in everything but name. Her fingers brushed the crimson sash tied around her waist—a reminder of the fight that had defined her for so long. The council awaited her response, their expressions expectant.

“I appreciate the offer,” Isolde said, her voice steady. “But I’m afraid I must decline.”

A murmur of surprise rippled through the room. The councilor who had addressed her frowned, leaning forward. “Decline? Lady Isolde, surely you understand how much the people look up to you. You could help shape the future of this kingdom.”

She met his gaze, her expression calm but unyielding. “I understand that all too well. And that’s why I can’t accept.”

As she left the chamber, the councilors’ murmurs followed her, a mix of confusion and disappointment. Isolde stepped into the palace gardens, the fresh scent of blooming flowers contrasting with the weight in her chest. The air here was lighter than it had been during the rebellion, but it still felt suffocating to her.

The rebellion had freed the kingdom, but Isolde had learned that freedom came in many forms. She had fought not for power, not for titles, but for the right to live without chains—whether they were forged by a tyrant or by the expectations of others.

Her thoughts drifted to her brother, Alain, and the life he might have had if Merignac hadn’t taken him. She could almost see him standing beside her, his easy smile and sharp wit lighting up even the darkest moments. She had fought for him, for his memory, but now that the fight was over, she realized that carrying his legacy meant more than avenging his death.

It meant living.

Later that evening, Isolde wandered the streets of the capital, her crimson sash drawing the eyes of those who passed her. Children pointed and whispered her name, and shopkeepers stepped out of their stalls to bow or offer a few kind words. She nodded politely, but each gesture only deepened her unease.

She stopped at a small inn on the outskirts of the city, its sign swinging gently in the breeze. Inside, the atmosphere was warm and inviting, the low hum of conversation blending with the soft strumming of a lute. Isolde ordered a drink and found a quiet corner to sit.

As she sipped her wine, she overheard snippets of conversation. People spoke of the council, of the rebuilding efforts, of the new leaders they hoped would guide them. But they also spoke of her—the Crimson Phantom—an enigmatic figure who had struck fear into the King’s forces and inspired courage in the rebellion.

“She could have taken the throne if she wanted,” one man said, his voice hushed but admiring.

“Maybe,” replied another. “But some people aren’t meant to rule. They’re meant to remind us of what’s worth fighting for.”

Isolde smiled faintly, raising her cup to her lips. The words weren’t entirely wrong. She hadn’t sought power, and she never would. But she wasn’t done fighting—not for herself, and not for the ideals she and her brother had shared.

The next morning, Isolde packed her few belongings and left the city without fanfare. She rode south, toward the open roads and rolling hills, where the wind carried the promise of freedom. Along the way, she stopped in villages and towns, sharing stories of the rebellion and helping where she could. She taught young women and men the art of swordplay, but also the importance of choosing their battles wisely.

Her crimson sash, tied loosely around her waist, became a symbol not of vengeance, but of resilience. Wherever she went, people whispered of the mysterious woman who had once stood against a king and now walked among them, free and unburdened.

At night, she would sit beneath the stars, her brother’s memory a quiet companion. She carried him with her—not as a weight, but as a guide, a reminder of the strength it took to hold onto hope.

Isolde had chosen her path. It wasn’t one of power or control, but of freedom. And for the first time in years, she felt at peace.

The sun hung low on the horizon, casting a warm golden glow over the quiet meadow. The soft rustle of leaves and the distant hum of insects filled the air, broken only by the faint sound of laughter. In the center of the field stood Gabriel, Étienne, and Isolde, their blades drawn—not for war, but for something far simpler.

Étienne twirled his sword lazily, grinning as he shifted into a mock dueling stance. “Well, this feels familiar. Except this time, we’re not being chased by a battalion or bleeding all over the ground.”

Gabriel smirked, his rapier poised in a defensive stance. “Don’t get too comfortable, Étienne. Just because this isn’t a battlefield doesn’t mean I’ll let you win.”

Isolde stood off to the side, her blade resting lightly in her hand. Her crimson sash was tied neatly around her waist, and her expression was one of amusement. “Are you two planning to talk each other to death, or are we actually doing this?”

Étienne laughed, taking a step forward. “Oh, we’re doing this. Don’t worry, Isolde—you’ll get your turn.”

The three had reunited here, far from the cities and villages where the echoes of the rebellion still lingered. It had been months since they had gone their separate ways—Gabriel to his school, Étienne to his village, and Isolde to the open road. Yet when the letter arrived, written in Gabriel’s steady hand and inviting them to one last gathering, neither had hesitated.

Étienne struck first, lunging at Gabriel with the raw power and aggression that had defined his fighting style. Gabriel parried easily, sidestepping and countering with a precise thrust that Étienne barely dodged.

“You’re slower,” Gabriel said, his tone teasing. “Too much time spent lounging in the village?”

Étienne grinned, circling him. “And you’re still too predictable. All technique, no flair.”

Their blades clashed, the sharp sound ringing out across the meadow. They moved with a familiarity born of countless battles fought side by side, their strikes and counters flowing like a practiced dance. But there was no malice here, no desperation—only the joy of testing their skills against one another.

Isolde watched for a moment, a faint smile tugging at her lips. Then she stepped forward, her blade raised. “Enough posturing. Let’s see if either of you can handle me.”

Gabriel and Étienne exchanged a quick glance before nodding in unspoken agreement. Étienne shifted his stance, preparing to flank, while Gabriel moved to meet her head-on.

Isolde was ready.

She deflected Gabriel’s first strike with ease, her blade moving like liquid fire. Spinning on her heel, she caught Étienne’s blade mid-swing, forcing him to stumble back. Her movements were precise and fluid, honed by years of practice and countless duels.

“Still think you can handle me?” she asked, her voice light but challenging.

Étienne laughed, stepping back into position. “You’ve gotten cocky, Phantom.”

“And you’ve gotten soft,” she retorted, darting toward him with a flurry of quick strikes. Étienne barely managed to keep up, his larger frame struggling to match her speed.

Gabriel took the opportunity to close in, his rapier aimed for a gap in her defenses. But Isolde anticipated the move, pivoting and forcing Gabriel to pull back to avoid her counter.

For several minutes, the three of them traded blows, their laughter mingling with the sound of steel. It wasn’t a fight—it was a celebration. Each clash of blades was a reminder of what they had endured together, what they had sacrificed, and what they had gained.

Eventually, they stopped, their breaths heavy but their spirits light. Gabriel lowered his rapier, his face flushed but smiling. “I’d say you’ve both improved. Maybe I should be taking lessons from you now.”

Étienne sheathed his sword, shaking his head with a laugh. “Don’t get ahead of yourself, old man. You barely kept up.”

Isolde wiped the sweat from her brow, her eyes shining. “You’re both still too predictable.”

They sat together in the grass, the fading sunlight casting long shadows across the meadow. The moment was quiet, peaceful—a stark contrast to the battles they had fought before. For a while, none of them spoke, content to let the silence stretch between them.

Finally, Gabriel broke the quiet. “I’ve thought about what we’ve done. What we’ve lost.”

Étienne nodded, his expression somber. “And what we’ve gained. It’s not what I imagined when we started, but... it’s enough.”

Isolde looked out at the horizon, her voice soft. “We’ve done what we could. The rest isn’t ours to control.”

Gabriel smiled faintly, his gaze steady. “No. But we gave them a chance. That’s more than most ever get.”

The three of them sat there until the sun dipped below the hills, the first stars appearing in the deepening sky. They had been comrades, fighters, and survivors. Now, they were something more—friends bound not just by blood, but by the honor they had forged together.

As they parted ways the next morning, there were no grand speeches or tearful goodbyes. They didn’t need them. Each of them knew that no matter where their paths led, the bonds they had formed would endure.

And so, as Gabriel returned to his students, as Étienne walked back to his village, and as Isolde rode toward the open road, they carried with them the knowledge that their legacy wasn’t written in crowns or thrones.

It was written in the lives they had touched, the choices they had made, and the hope they had kindled.

It was enough.